

The ‘Delaying of Age’ Novel in Contemporary Italian Literature (1980–2011)

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Abstract

This thesis explores the development of the *Bildungsroman* in Italian narrative between 1980 and 2011 and focuses, as a case study, on seven novels by three contemporary writers: Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Sandro Veronesi, and Giuseppe Culicchia. By contrasting the idea of an end of the literary genre with the First World War, as theorised by Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World* (an influential study on the European *Bildungsroman* published in 1987), this research will aim to demonstrate that contemporary Italian literature still engages with the genre. However, this analysis will show that a traditional coming of age process is no longer possible in contemporary society and will propose a different perspective from which to observe the transition from youth to adulthood – and its representation – in Italy. Acknowledging that the postponement of adulthood has become a common trope to describe this process, this thesis will argue that, instead of a coming of age process, the male young protagonist of the novels selected faces a ‘delaying of age process’, a conscious choice to postpone his entry into an unwelcoming adult world.

The first two chapters of this work will establish the methodological background on which the textual analysis conducted in the following two chapters will be based. Chapter One will develop along two complementary lines: on the one hand, by basing my discussion on Moretti’s study, I will trace the origins of the *Bildungsroman* and identify the elements of continuity and diversity between the traditional examples of the genre in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its evolution in the twentieth century. On the other hand, I will study the changes undergone by youth over the centuries, especially focusing on the shaping of male identity in the first decades of the twentieth century. Chapter Two will provide the socio-historical framework of this research, drawing a picture of contemporary Italy (from the aftermath of the Second World War), which will discuss the central issues against which the ‘delaying of age process’ will be analysed: generation, family, gender roles, work environment and consumption. In Chapters Three and Four, I will read the narrative texts selected as representing that ‘delaying of age’ trend which I will identify as a specifically Italian way of coming of age in contemporary society. By focusing on the relationship between the male protagonists and the ‘other’,

the textual analysis will show new ways of conceiving the process of becoming a man in contemporary Italy.

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Introduction

Studying the *Bildungsroman* in Contemporary Italian Literature

I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am.
The main interest in life and work is to become someone
else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when
you began a book what you would say at the end, do you
think that you would have the courage to write it? What is
true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life.
The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will
be the end.

Michel Foucault

In an article published in the left-wing Italian newspaper *Il Manifesto* in 2010, the Italian writer Marco Mancassola looks at the younger generation – the one he belongs to – with a sense of despair. Acknowledging young people's passivity and their inability to actively oppose the lack of opportunities offered by Italian society, he effectively speaks of 'una generazione locked-in'. As affected by the locked-in syndrome – a medical condition that does not allow the patient to move or communicate verbally, despite being awake and aware – the Italian younger generation, according to the author, cannot find the words or the actions to collectively claim their right to adulthood. In his article, Mancassola blames consumerism for having fostered a strong link between 'having' and 'being', making the definition of one's identity ridden with uncertainty:

Abbiamo identità sincretiche, sfaccettate, frammentate e dislocate. Il mercato delle merci e delle esperienze ha instillato in noi, volenti o nolenti, la percezione che la vita vera fosse sempre altrove, sempre un po' più in là, in un altro luogo: non solo nell'acquisto di un'altra merce o in un altro piano del centro commerciale, ma proprio in un'altra esperienza da fare, in un altro incontro da consumare, in un'altra emozione da non lasciarsi sfuggire, in un altro viaggio da intraprendere, in un altro capitolo del nostro romanzo interiore. Siamo cresciuti pensando che la nostra vita vera fosse altrove solo per renderci conto, infine, che forse non è più da nessuna parte.¹

¹ Marco Mancassola, 'Generazione locked-in?', *Il Manifesto*, (2010) <http://www.marcomancassola.com/marco_mancassola_a_nord/2010/11/generazione-locked-in.html> [accessed 10 December 2012].

A ceaseless yearning for new experiences affects the coming of age pattern, making adulthood no longer a desired status, but, on the contrary, a phase of life which young men and women tend to postpone. On the one hand, consumer society offers virtually endless possibilities of self-definition, allowing young people to experiment with their identities; on the other hand, the profound changes undergone by Italian society in recent years have destabilised traditional social frameworks, modifying, as a consequence, the process of transition from youth to adulthood. If being an adult is connected to entry into the work environment and the assumption of responsibilities with regards to the familial and social milieu, Italy is going through an economic stagnation that certainly does not help young people's transition towards adulthood.

The postponing of adulthood has become a common trope to define contemporary youth: the aim of this study is to explore the ways in which this has been represented by three contemporary Italian writers who, I would argue, engage with the *Bildungsroman* genre, yet 'update' it by taking into account youth's difficult coming of age, giving rise to what I have defined a 'delaying of age' novel. Even though issues of coming of age have been at the centre of other contemporary Italian novels, I decided to primarily focus on seven texts produced between 1980 and 2011 by Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Sandro Veronesi and Giuseppe Culicchia. There are three main reasons behind my choice. First of all, the works in question, *Altri libertini* (Tondelli, 1980), *Camere separate* (Tondelli, 1989), *Gli sfiorati* (Veronesi, 1990), *Tutti giù per terra* (Culicchia, 1994), *Paso Doble* (Culicchia, 1995), *Brucia la città* (Culicchia, 2009) and *Ameni inganni* (Culicchia, 2011) represent the coming of age narrative pattern through the eyes of a male protagonist in his late youth. These young men, who in some of the novels are already biographically adults, constitute a perfect case study for the analysis of the postponement of adulthood and its literary representation.² Furthermore, in this work I am particularly interested in studying the variations of the coming of age narrative by looking at the process of becoming a man: gender and sexuality are two important elements of my analysis of the narrative texts in Chapters Three and Four. The selection of

² One of the short stories included in *Altri libertini* features a group of young women as protagonists; however, my analysis of the text in Chapter Three will not take into consideration all the stories included in Tondelli's work, but will mainly focus on 'Viaggio'.

novels I decided to study has been influenced by the portrayal of youth from a wide range of perspectives, allowing a comprehensive study of a variety of patterns of coming of age.³ Published between 1980 and 2011, these texts also form an interesting case study because they reflect upon the changes in society (and in the coming of age) which have involved young Italians in this thirty-year gap. Finally, despite the rather extensive historical period taken into account, this compact corpus will ideally enable me to trace comparison and constant cross-references among the novels, substantiating my definition of a 'delaying of age' trend which, in contemporary Italian literature, has replaced the traditional coming of age plot. Tondelli, Veronesi and Culicchia are not the only writers to deal with the coming of age pattern in contemporary narrative: Niccolò Ammaniti, for instance, is one of the most prolific Italian writers who has produced coming of age novels. However, the protagonists of his novels are often children and adolescents and, in this research, I am interested in exploring the liminal phase of transition between youth and adulthood.⁴ The transition between childhood and youth has also been narrated by Veronesi in his *Brucia Troia*, which has not been included in this research.⁵ Another example of contemporary coming of age novels, which, for the same reason, is not included in this study, is Enrico Brizzi's *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo*, whose story does not evolve into a coming of age process for the young protagonist Alex, but is the almost continuous narration of a few months of his adolescence.⁶ Furthermore, this study focuses on the process of coming of age for young men, therefore leaving out all those texts that deal with a female process of development, as I will explain in Chapter One.

In this introductory section, I will provide a brief account of the new trends which have populated contemporary Italian narrative, from youth narrative and young authors to an increasing interest surrounding youth. After

³ I will study the 'delaying of age' of the male protagonist by looking at a number of factors which have – directly or indirectly – influenced their coming of age process: relationships with adult figures (especially family members) and social institutions; the work environment; the peer and generational group; romantic relationships and sexuality (with a focus on homosexuality and pornography).

⁴ Among Ammaniti's novels which deal with the coming of age narrative we can identify Niccolò Ammaniti, *Ti prendo e ti porto via* (Milan: Mondadori, 1999); Niccolò Ammaniti, *Io non ho paura* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001); Niccolò Ammaniti, *Come Dio comanda* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006); Niccolò Ammaniti, *Io e te* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010).

⁵ See Sandro Veronesi, *Brucia Troia* (Milan: Bompiani, 2007).

⁶ See Enrico Brizzi, *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1994).

having introduced the three writers I am working on, I will turn to explain the structure of this work and its methodological and theoretical approach.

Youth Power? New Trends in Contemporary Italian Narrative

The *Bildungsroman* has been the focus of intense scrutiny over the centuries: from the first critical studies to more recent examples, literature scholars have analysed the genre from a variety of perspectives, including, as I will show in Chapter One, a renewed interest in the coming of age process of female subjects (the female *Bildungsroman*). Despite its German origin, examples of the coming of age novel can be traced in European literature: one of the most influential studies on the genre – Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* – first published in 1987, examines the evolution of the genre in European literature, especially focusing on German, British, and French narrative.⁷ Moretti's seminal work will be a central point of reference for my work and I will delve into it for a more detailed analysis in Chapter One; the critical text, however, lacks a perspective on Italian narrative, making the link between Italian literature and the coming of age narrative a feeble one. More generally, if we attempt a survey of those critical works which deal with the *Bildungsroman* narrative, it seems clear that the study of this literary genre in Italian literature has not held the same privileged position as in other European literature.

A few studies have attempted to shed light on the influence of the *Bildungsroman* on Italian literature: the collection of essays *Il romanzo di formazione nell'Ottocento e nel Novecento* offers a comprehensive analysis of the re-elaboration of the coming of age trope in the Italian narrative of the nineteenth and twentieth century.⁸ Each essay deals with a different case study from a wide range of Italian narrative texts: the first two contributions, however,

⁷ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 2000). Moretti identifies Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795) and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) as the archetypes of the literary genre. From this initial phase, the *Bildungsroman*, according to Moretti, developed along two different lines: in the first group could be included the novels by Stendhal *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830) and *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839). The second group includes those novels produced between Balzac's *Illusions Perdues* (1837–43) and Flaubert's *L'Education Sentimentale* (1869).

⁸ Maria Carla Papini, Daniele Fioretti, and Teresa Spignoli, eds., *Il romanzo di formazione nell'Ottocento e nel Novecento* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2007). The volume collects the proceedings of the conference co-organised by MOD (Società italiana per lo studio della modernità letteraria) and the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Florence in 2005.

aim to provide a more general introduction to the *Bildungsroman* genre in European (Mario Domenichelli)⁹ and in Italian literature (Clelia Martignoni). Martignoni's overview of the coming of age influence on Italian narrative traces the origins of the literary genre and its development in the Italian cultural environment. By focusing on the evolution of the category of youth over the century and, as a consequence, of the coming of age narrative as the genre which has been able to represent youth at its best, the author identifies the first examples of the genre among the works produced by the *vocianti* – those writers whose experimental narrative and poetic works (together with cultural and political contributions) were often published in the periodical *La Voce*. From then on, Martignoni highlights a series of Italian writers who engaged with the *Bildungsroman*: from Alberto Moravia and Federigo Tozzi to Mario Soldati and Giorgio Bassani, the genre has found a fertile ground to develop in the Italian cultural and social milieu of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the essay touches briefly on contemporary narrative examples and the generational approach to the coming of age narrative by authors such as Brizzi, Silvia Ballestra, Isabella Santacroce, Simona Vinci, Culicchia, and Ammaniti.¹⁰ The other chapters of the volume provide an interesting point of departure for the analysis of specific Italian narrative texts in the light of the *Bildungsroman*. A similar approach inspires the work of Giovanna Summerfield and Lisa Downward who, in their *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman*, look at the literary genre from two main themes: spirituality and gender (the female *Bildungsroman*).¹¹ Adopting a comparative approach, the authors provide a critical reading of works by Ugo Foscolo and Carlo Collodi (in the spirituality section) and Neera, Sibilla Aleramo and Susanna Tamaro (discussion on female identity), along with examples of coming of age narratives from other European literature.¹²

⁹ See Mario Domenichelli, 'Il romanzo di formazione nella tradizione europea', in *Il romanzo di formazione nell'Ottocento e nel Novecento*, ed. by Maria Carla Papini, Daniele Fioretti, and Teresa Spignoli (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2007), pp. 11–37.

¹⁰ See Clelia Martignoni, 'Per il romanzo di formazione nel Novecento italiano: Linee, orientamenti, sviluppi', in *Il romanzo di formazione nell'Ottocento e nel Novecento*, ed. by Maria Carla Papini, Daniele Fioretti, and Teresa Spignoli (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2007), pp. 57–92.

¹¹ Giovanna Summerfield and Lisa Downward, *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman* (London: Continuum, 2010).

¹² Along this general scholarly research on the *Bildungsroman* in Italy and Europe, there are of course more specific studies: to remember, for instance, the work done by Valentina Mascaretti on Moravia. See Valentina Mascaretti, *La speranza violenta: Alberto Moravia e il romanzo di formazione* (Bologna: Gedit, 2006). My previous work on the evolution of the genre in Italian

The texts discussed above are a good starting point to initiate the dialogue on the influence of the *Bildungsroman* on Italian literature: while previous work done on this topic shows that it is certainly possible to find examples of this literary genre produced by Italian authors, it should be noted that contemporary literature – meaning narrative produced in the last two decades of the twentieth century and in the new millennium – is not often the subject of studies which investigate the process of coming of age of the protagonist. My work aims to fill this gap: by reading seven contemporary narrative texts as deriving from the *Bildungsroman* genre, it not only provides a close textual analysis which relies on gender, cultural, and psychoanalytical studies, but it also posits that, in contemporary Italian literature, a traditional coming of age plot is no longer possible, but social, cultural, and historical developments have affected the way in which the growing up and identification process is narrated for young male protagonists. Before moving on to introduce the three writers at the centre of my analysis, I will discuss new trends in contemporary Italian literature, especially focusing on the narration of ‘youth’ and ‘being young’ which have taken centre stage in recent narrative works.

I believe it important to start with a definition of ‘contemporaneity’, inasmuch as it is a concept whose temporal boundaries can easily change. To define Tondelli, Veronesi, and Culicchia as contemporary writers means to take into account, in the analysis of their oeuvre, two fundamental elements: the first is the lack of a proper temporal gap between the work of art and the critic, an imaginary barrier which should have the function of establishing a detached point of observation for literary analysis; the second, deeply entwined with the first point, is the circulation of a literature which, as a product of the market, treats high and low culture without any distinctions. I would like to linger briefly over these two points. When dealing with contemporary literature, the critic becomes immediately involved in the process of making the contemporary literature she/he is studying, as she/he partakes of the same historical and social context in which the novel has been composed. The more immediate consequence of contemporaneity is therefore the ‘absence of a vibrant critical

literature of the second half of the twentieth century also analyses male coming of age narratives in novels by Umberto Saba, Moravia, Soldati, and Paolo Volponi. See Ilaria Masenga, ‘Uomini si diventa: Il *Bildungsroman* italiano del secondo Novecento: uno studio di genere’, *Quaderni di Donne & Ricerca*, 16 (2009). See Chapter One for a discussion of the coming of age narrative after the two World Wars.

community¹³ within the Italian literary field of the last thirty years. The issue, problematised by Jennifer Burns in her analysis of commitment in contemporary Italian narrative, was at first brought to the fore by writers themselves: Tondelli and Ballestra (just to name two authors that I, like Burns, consider representative of the 1980s and the 1990s) deplored the inadequacy of the critical community within which they worked, which they considered unable to trigger a fruitful dialogue with both authors and readers. As for the narrative released in the first two decades of the new millennium, critical scrutiny still remains patchy, causing the lack of a systematic conceptualization of trends and themes. However, it is important to highlight a crucial change in the attitude of more recent writers, who act differently from their predecessors towards the shortcomings of literary criticism; abandoning that 'isolation'¹⁴ lamented by Tondelli, they consistently respond by becoming protagonists of the critical context and, as a consequence, committing themselves to several fields, other than narrative. As Burns underlines, for instance, Ammaniti is not only a writer, but also a critic for the newspaper *La Stampa* and, I would add, the writers I will discuss in this work follow the same path by engaging with different forms of cultural production. Culicchia writes regularly for *La Stampa* and its weekly magazine *Torino Sette*, as well as being an active blogger; Veronesi has been involved in several artistic projects such as writing and hosting a television programme, he is the co-founder of the publishing house *Fandango Libri* and of the web radio station *Radiogas*, and his last works – the novel *Xy* (2010) and the collection of short stories *Baci scagliati altrove* (2011) – have been thoroughly advertised on the web, with a specific online campaign which highlights the crucial importance of the internet as part and parcel of publishing success.¹⁵

¹³ Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980–2000* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2001), p. 185.

¹⁴ I agree with Burns when she defines 'Tondelli's isolation from the "professionals"' as 'a gap between high and "low" (or popular) culture': as she suggests, in fact, the first reason for a lack in engagement of critics with contemporary Italian literature is indeed that 'critics seem to lack the cultural apparatus and the language' to interpret it (p. 136).

¹⁵ In addition, all the writers, with the obvious exception of Tondelli, have a personal website through which they advertise their novels and keep in contact with their public. Furthermore, Veronesi's *Xy*, released in October 2010, is a novelty, because it is supposed to be the first viral novel: the author, together with the publishing house *Fandango Libri*, set up a website (www.x-y.it) in which future readers have access to several clues and extra reading material. As for *Baci scagliati altrove*, an iPhone and iPad app allows reader not only to read the book on their mobile devices, but also to connect on Facebook to discuss the book on the *Fandango Libri* online

Moreover – and this is my second point – critics experience a further difficulty in tackling contemporary literature because of the way in which contemporary literature seems to deal with high and low topics and situations. I am referring to a phenomenon which has its roots in the Italy of the 1970s, a decade during which ‘the intricate psychological, social and political make-up’ coexisted with ‘the breaking down of barriers between the personal and the political, the private and the public, and high and low culture’, giving birth to ‘changes and trends which have manifested themselves and, in some cases, entered the mainstream only in recent years’.¹⁶ Literary critics in the thirty-year period under analysis can be disorientated by the abolition of distinctions between high and low literature and the increasing importance assumed by a new form of novel, the ‘romanzo medio’;¹⁷ they sometimes show a serious inadequateness in understanding popular culture, indeed they read the conjunction of ‘popular’ and ‘culture’ – and, by extension, ‘literature’ – as an oxymoron, denying any remarkable relations between the two spheres. While Stefano Tani uses the adjective *medio* aiming to underline the mediocrity of contemporary Italian literature, I would rather agree with Burns in defining mediocrity (and postmodernity) as ‘a cultural given’ which creates the ‘space within it to take up positions which challenge the status quo’.¹⁸

I would identify three features of Italian contemporary narrative, which exemplify the main changes brought about by the cultural and socio-political revolution of the 1970s.¹⁹ The first point concerns the relationship between literature and publishing: as a cultural effect of postmodernity, the levelling of literary production towards the market’s needs has often been seen as a direct consequence of ‘the collapse of the high-middle-low culture hierarchy to leave a general, middle-brow, middle-class, mix’.²⁰ This marketing and cultural practice is, however, a symptom of that historical and cultural background which Marino Sinibaldi has named ‘era della simultaneità’, in which the undeniable impact of

page. See Sandro Veronesi, *XY* (Rome: Fandango Libri, 2010); Sandro Veronesi, *Baci scagliati altrove* (Rome: Fandango Libri, 2011).

¹⁶ Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio, ‘The 1970s through the Looking Glass’, in *Speaking Out and Silencing: Culture, Society and Politics in Italy in the 1970s*, ed. by Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio (Oxford: Legenda, 2006), pp. 1–8 (p. 1).

¹⁷ Stefano Tani, *Il romanzo di ritorno: Dal romanzo medio degli anni sessanta alla giovane narrativa degli anni ottanta* (Milan: Mursia, 1990).

¹⁸ Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, p. 185.

¹⁹ My intention is to provide in Chapter Two a thorough analysis of the socio-historical context of the period.

²⁰ Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, p. 184.

new cultural and social media on literature revolutionises stylistic patterns and fictional themes.²¹

Secondly, it is a matter of language, which becomes a lively medium for the representation of reality. The social recognition of a variety of voices which, through protests and political demonstrations had for the first time made themselves visible in the eyes of society, caused a parallel movement within the literary world. Shaken to the foundations, literature shifted from being a means of expression for elite groups to a useful tool in the hands of those social categories – youth, women, and *popolo* – who had been always considered as minorities and who could use narrative to cast light on their claims. Language is, of course, the first narrative element to undergo an alignment with this new trend, accurately reproducing slang and vernaculars and ‘blurring the traditional demarcations between the literary and non-literary’: the result is the rejection of ‘the high codes of Italian literary language’ and the adoption of ‘styles of expression close to orality’.²² Although Cento Bull and Giorgio focus on women writers, language as a faithful device to depict reality and to bridge the gap between author and public is a common trope which links the texts I am taking into account in my research. Briefly, in Italian literature from the 1980s to the present it is possible to trace a strong legacy of the 1970s narrative, which Burns terms ‘the Dams connection’.²³ During the seventies, the degree course in ‘Discipline delle arti, musica e spettacolo’ at the University of Bologna, in fact, was a forge for talented writers, such as Gianni Celati, Enrico Palandri, Claudio Piersanti, and Tondelli, who were protagonists of an unequalled stylistic revolution, something which Burns points out as an utter novelty:

This ‘something’ might be described as a mode of writing which is clearly of the period and influenced by the break-up of the individual subject and of linguistic and literary conventions, which also carries and disseminates a political, and broader moral, conscience, and which additionally aims beyond the current and the contemporary and seeks to explore issues of perennial and perhaps conventional literary concern such as love, social interaction, responsibility. Youth is its focus and provides its consciousness, and it is the factor which, superficially at least, marks the continuity from the late 1970s to the *giovani narratori* of the 1980s and the *nuova narrativa* and *cannibali* of the 1990s. (Burns, p. 91)

²¹ Marino Sinibaldi, *Pulp: La letteratura nell’era della simultaneità* (Rome: Donzelli, 1997).

²² Cento Bull and Giorgio, *Speaking Out and Silencing*, p. 3.

²³ Jennifer Burns, ‘A Leaden Silence?: Writers’ Responses to the *anni di piombo*’, in *Speaking Out and Silencing: Culture, Society and Politics in Italy in the 1970s*, ed. by Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio (Oxford: Legenda, 2006), pp. 81–94 (p. 91).

Finally, as my second point has already anticipated, it is also a matter of content: a new paradigm takes place in contemporary literary production, that of an increasing attention towards the ordinary and individual dimension. In a conference held in Ancona about *Nuovi Narratori '90*, Giorgio van Straten highlighted this new approach to narrative themes:

oggi la sede del significato non è più la storia, ma il quotidiano, il piccolo, il ravvicinato. È un elemento di lavoro molto importante, poiché quest'analisi rappresenta il passaggio dalla storia alle storie, dal collettivo all'individuale. Credo che questo dell'avvicinato rappresenti lo sforzo per avere un significato.²⁴

The concept of *avvicinato*, thus, underlines the importance of the individual experience as a topic of interest for writers and readers from the 1970s onwards; the *letteratura impegnata*, a kind of narrative which was politically committed, loses its centrality to shift towards more personal themes. However, this does not mean a sharp detachment from the commitment paradigm which characterised the former generation of writers, but, as Burns points out, certain contemporary Italian writers take very seriously their responsibility to the society in which their readers live, and aim in some way to represent it, even where postmodern scepticism conditions their conviction.²⁵

This personal form of commitment (Burns' 'fragments of *impegno*'), which, I would argue, also characterises the authors I am considering in this research therefore still investigates the socio-cultural context, but focuses on those aspects which mostly interest both writer and reader as members of society. The representation of society which, in Burns' opinion, is part and parcel of contemporary Italian narrative thus cannot avoid taking into account youth as a pivotal theme. Since the *Bildungsroman* is the narrative form which has depicted this phase of life, I would suggest that some of the features of the traditional genre can be identified in more recent novels about youth. However, the persistence of elements of the genre is not due to a tired perpetuation of older narrative structures; rather, I would read it as symptomatic of its topicality,

²⁴ Giorgio van Straten, paper given at the conference *Nuovi Narratori '90* (Ancona, Palazzo degli Anziani, 20th - 22nd April 1990), quoted in Raffaele Cardone, Franco Galato, and Fulvio Panzeri, eds., *Altre storie: Inventario della nuova narrativa italiana fra anni '80 e '90* (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1996), p. 27.

²⁵ Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, p. 5.

as a means of interpretation of realities that are still of central interest within contemporary society. More specifically, the *Bildungsroman* as the novel of youth, or better, as the literary genre which explores the process of becoming in Western societies, therefore reflects the ceaseless attention paid to young identity.

The concept of youth is interesting in itself because it could refer either to the narrative theme and/or to the writers themselves as belonging to the same younger generation. Literary critic and writer Maria Corti outlined the main feature shared by authors of the new wave of literature, describing them as 'giovani scrittori, dove l'attributo giovane viene riferito ora all'età, ora al fatto che siano esordienti, cioè giovani come uomini di penna, nuove leve'.²⁶ The definition sets up clearly two ways of defining youth in relation to writing and new narrative trends: being a young narrator can depend upon the biographical data and/or the literary exploit. Therefore, 'youth' is related to the author as a young woman or man who is taking her/his first steps as a novelist; furthermore, I will suggest the adjective is also linked to another dimension, no longer personal and 'internal' to the writer, but 'external' and concerning the more general category of the audience. The main target of the new young literature is a public of young readers, who have become interested in recent literary production: in a study sponsored by the Province of Milan,²⁷ which aimed to make an inventory of the new Italian narrative of the eighties and nineties in order to suggest new paths of reading to libraries and educational institutions, the authors clearly stated the particular relationship between writer and reader, which evolves through shared experiences. In other words, as Cardone, Galato, and Panzeri suggested, 'la forza della nuova narrativa [...] è il fatto che i lettori ci si possono rispecchiare' (p. 54). In conclusion, I would argue that 'youth' is indeed a central element in contemporary Italian narrative: it has to do with the biographical aspect, which refers to the age of authors and their early literary success; the generational readership; and the fictional protagonist, considered as a member of that social cluster. This last aspect, then, is particularly pertinent to the case of the *Bildungsroman*, whose protagonist par excellence is indeed the young man (and sometimes the young woman).

²⁶ Maria Corti, 'Al trotto al galoppo il romanzo cambia', *Millelibri*, 27 (1990). Quoted in *Altre storie*, ed. by Cardone, Galato, and Panzeri, p. 25.

²⁷ *Altre storie*, ed. by Cardone, Galato, and Panzeri.

Finally, a further comment has to be made to avoid any ambiguity about the use of the term 'young': the adjective in conjunction with words such as 'novel' and 'writer', in fact, loses its rather negative meaning of first attempt, incomplete work and novice author. On the contrary, its significance is more general and refers to a wider youth culture; in this regard, art critic Luca Beatrice supports the birth of a new cultural role assumed by this term:

Con questo termine di solito si tende a definire una certa condizione anagrafica da utilizzare come garanzia allo scopo di prendere tempo. Trattandosi di un'opera 'giovane' non sarà ancora quella matura o definitiva [...]. Oggi con 'giovane' si tende piuttosto a indicare 'cultura giovanile' [...] E lo stesso sembra valere anche nella letteratura, ragione per cui assistiamo a un allargamento almeno potenziale del pubblico interessato a questo tipo di prodotto culturale, al superamento dei limiti che differenziano una disciplina rispetto a un'altra (scivolando così in un territorio ibrido), all'abbassamento dell'età del pubblico, per cui chi fa arte o letteratura sempre più spesso deve pensare ai gusti di un osservatorio coetaneo – se non più giovane – che legge, ascolta musica, si interessa a una qualsiasi delle tante pratiche 'basse' disponibili sul mercato.²⁸

The quotation above brings to the fore another central feature of this kind of narrative: the mixture of genres and media in a form which makes the work of art closer to contemporary daily and popular practices, such as music and television enjoyment. The study of contemporary literature, therefore, cannot be detached from the context in which it has been conceived and which it portrays: every element is a fundamental part of the literary project, and the social and historical context sets up both the signifier and the signified of the novel. I would therefore suggest that the study of contemporary Italian literature cannot follow a close textual reading, because the risk here is to neglect the extra-textual system which instead shapes the real meaning. In conclusion, I aim to approach the study of Italian contemporary literature as a broader cultural inquiry, focusing, as Burns does in her research, on the 'deep-rooted and essential engagement of the writer with his world; and this world is clearly at least a reflection, if not a representation, of Italy in the period concerned'.²⁹ A nation and its culture, or, better, an Italian youth culture will be the background of this work, seeking that national specificity, the *italianità*, which, I suggest, allows me to speak of a contemporary *Italian* evolution of the *Bildungsroman*.

²⁸ Luca Beatrice, *Stesso sangue: DNA di una generazione* (Rome: Minimum Fax, 1999), pp. 9–10.

²⁹ Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, p. 183.

Introducing the Authors

Having delineated the ways in which contemporary literature engages with the topic of youth and becoming, thus re-elaborating the coming of age novel, in this section I will introduce the three writers whose narrative production is under analysis in this work. Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Sandro Veronesi, and Giuseppe Culicchia are three main authors in the Italian literature panorama between 1980 and 2011 and their career paths have several points of contact that I will outline here. From a generational point of view, Veronesi and Tondelli belong to the same age group, while Culicchia is younger.³⁰ Both Tondelli and Culicchia wrote – as I will show later in this section – their debut novel when very young, while Veronesi's career as a writer began only later in his life. Apart from this biographical data, the lives and artistic paths of these three writers are often intertwined and seem to be connected – at least in the case of Culicchia – to Tondelli's own generational approach to contemporary literature.

According to Elisabetta Mondello, much of the literature produced in Italy after the 1980s has its roots in Tondelli's narrative style: 'Tondelli è vissuto come un "classico" di una modernità letteraria cui i giovani sentono di appartenere', she argues.³¹ The scholar identifies three main points of connection between Tondelli and the younger generation of writers: first of all, because of his groundbreaking narrative style, which stands out against previous literary forms, Tondelli finds new words to express the youth condition, being, therefore, the first to be able to 'aver immesso sulla pagina la realtà di un mondo e di una generazione attraverso una lingua, uno stile, un contesto, una mitologia che la rispecchiavano perfettamente' (Mondello, p. 18). Furthermore, the writing process is seen as a medium through which it is possible for the author to speak directly to the reader. Establishing a relationship with his readers has always been one of Tondelli's main preoccupations, as he states in an interview with Fulvio Panzeri: '[q]uello che mi affascina – e che è solo della scrittura – è la possibilità di parlare a una persona, di avere un rapporto di individualità con il

³⁰ Pier Vittorio Tondelli was born in 1955, Veronesi in 1959, and Culicchia is about ten years younger having been born in 1965.

³¹ Elisabetta Mondello, *In principio fu Tondelli: Letteratura, merci, televisione nella narrativa degli anni novanta* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2007), p. 18.

lettore, un rapporto che è di uno a uno.³² Finally, the third element that, starting with Tondelli, will become a characteristic of the narrative works in the 1990s is the strong presence of media, which establish a connection between identity and consumption. As Mondello argues, '[i]n Tondelli, infatti, emerge già con forza il tema che esploderà nelle scritture degli anni novanta della trasposizione in sede narrativa del sistema consumi/identità, al cui interno un ruolo significativo è attribuito alla funzione dei media'.³³

It is possible to identify the three features of Tondelli's narrative highlighted by Mondello in most of the contemporary literature which has entered the Italian scene after the 1980s and, especially, from the 1990s: Culicchia is certainly a very good example, since he 'inherited' from Tondelli both the attention to a language able to express and interpret young people's lives and emotions, and the fascination with media, which is central in many of his works. Chapters Three and Four will offer a detailed analysis of Culicchia's novels; however, here it is worth highlighting the main points of connection between the two authors, which, from a stylistic point of view, lie in the ceaseless attention to the youth world. In *Brucia la città* (Chapter Three), *Tutti giù per terra*, and *Paso Doble* (Chapter Four), Culicchia pictures two different young generations through the eyes of their protagonists. By giving voice to a social group which, usually, does not have the chance to be heard by adult society, Culicchia follows in the footsteps of Tondelli, who, in *Altri libertini* (Chapter Three) makes young people speak for the first time through his narrative.

Furthermore, Culicchia's texts under analysis here offer an example of the connection between identity and consumption represented, for the first time, by Tondelli. The coming of age process of the young protagonists of these novels depends (partly) on being part of a subcultural group within which it is possible to validate one's identity. The peer group, thus, becomes the secluded repository of new trends and lifestyles, often developed through media such as music, television, and fashion. Another stylistic feature shared by Tondelli and Culicchia is, therefore, their cataloguing of youth's cultural and consumption trends. As I will show in the text analysis in Chapter Three, in *Altri libertini* – and

³² Fulvio Panzeri, 'Il mestiere di scrittore: Conversazioni con Fulvio Panzeri', in *Pier Vittorio Tondelli: Opere: Cronache, saggi, conversazioni*, ed. by Fulvio Panzeri (Milan: Bompiani, 2000), pp. 969–1011 (p. 971).

³³ Mondello, *In principio fu Tondelli*, p. 24.

more generally in Tondelli's narrative production – 'troviamo rispecchiato tutto il catalogo dei prodotti tipici degli anni ottanta, citati spesso assiomaticamente e comunque in modo sempre indicativo del dato generazionale' (Mondello, p. 32).

The affinity between Tondelli's and Culicchia's writing styles are not surprising if we think that Culicchia debuted into the Italian literary panorama thanks to Tondelli's *Progetto Under 25*, a project thought up and coordinated by Tondelli to give voice to new young writers. This initiative came almost at the end of Tondelli's career and represented his desire to help usually marginalised strata of society to be heard – a desire which has been rooted in many of his narrative representations of society. Tondelli's career as a writer started with the publication of *Altri libertini* in 1980.³⁴ An iconic writer of the 1980s, Tondelli's narrative works have often been considered as mirroring a historical generation, that between the seventies and the eighties, from its youth to its – chronological – maturity. Not only his literary production but also his short life has been interpreted as condensing the spirit of the decade, both culturally and socially: he was born in 1955 in Correggio (Emilia Romagna), and his literary production embraced a ten-year period that started with the publication of the first novel – or collection of short stories – *Altri libertini* in 1980 and ended with his premature death from AIDS in 1991. His debut was marked by great success, especially in terms of readers: twenty days after its publication, however, *Altri libertini* was confiscated due to the accusation of obscenity, but both author and editor were acquitted on all counts. What was considered 'obscene' in the novel was, apart from the linguistic choices, the depiction of a marginalised social cluster, with scenes of drug taking, prostitution, and homosexual relationships. At the end of the same year, Tondelli started his military service and his experience was the inspiration for his second novel, *Pao Pao*, published in 1982. Between the publications of his first two novels, he was involved in writing articles for various newspapers, an activity that he would pursue throughout his life. 1985 saw the appearance of *Rimini*, his third novel, preceded by *Dinner Party*, a theatrical text. Tondelli's relationship with literature found expression not only in his own writing but also in the promotion of new writers: in 1985, he

³⁴ The brief biography I am about to outline does not aim to be detailed or comprehensive, but has only the purpose of providing some rough lines to follow while approaching the study of two of Tondelli's novels in the forthcoming chapters. For a detailed biography of the writer, see Fulvio Panzeri, ed., *Pier Vittorio Tondelli: Opere: Romanzi, teatro, racconti*. Vol. 1 (Milan: Bompiani, 2000).

started the *Progetto Under 25*, a call for short stories addressed to under-twenty-five-year-olds, from which three anthologies originated: *Giovani Blues* (1986), *Belli & Perversi* (1987), and *Papergang* (1990). After the publication of *Biglietti agli amici* in 1986 – a series of reflections and thoughts dedicated to his closest friends – Tondelli returned to the novel with *Camere separate* (1989), one of the texts I will analyse in Chapter Four. The last two products of his short but intense career are *Un weekend postmoderno: Cronache degli anni ottanta* (1990) and *L'abbandono: Racconti degli anni ottanta*, which appeared posthumously in 1993.

The protagonist of the first two novels, *Altri libertini* and *Pao Pao*, is an Italian youth contesting society and its institutions; in the last novel, *Camere separate*, the same generation has become older, but it is still in the process of becoming mature and, as I will show in the following chapters, its voice is no longer speaking in the social debate, but turns into an intimate tone. To look at Tondelli as a generational writer – as I will do in Chapter Three – means to acknowledge, with Burns, that he is ‘a writer whose work is relatively widely read but seems narrowly appreciated. In the field of contemporary Italian culture almost everyone knows of him, many people knew him personally, few know what they think about his work.’³⁵ The quotation sheds light on a crucial aspect of Tondelli’s poetic: in his works, in fact, the notion of generation is not easily classified as a narrative theme or as a mode of writing, but the two often overlap, giving life to a mimetic effect which blurs the borders between the author’s personal experience and fictional unit. This is not to say that Tondelli’s works are consequently autobiographical – even if I will show later on the interesting role of autobiography in his literary texts – but it is true that the historical and cultural data occupies a pre-eminent place in both stylistic patterns and narrative motifs. The twenty-five-year-old writer of *Altri libertini* is part of the young generation he describes with such a vivid tone and language borrowed from daily speech and jargon; he is a member of that enlarged peer group which is Italian youth between the 1970s and the 1980s from which he constantly seeks recognition. Concurrently, Tondelli’s interest in the world of youngsters does not end as time goes by: on the contrary, it seems to assume a more political character, embracing new forms of juvenile support, especially

³⁵ Jennifer Burns, ‘Code Breaking: The Demands of Interpretation in the Work of Pier Vittorio Tondelli’, *The Italianist*, 20 (2000), 253–73 (p. 253).

in the field of literary production, and rediscovering that *impegno* which, in his novels, is not present, at least in its traditional forms. Tondelli can be read as a committed writer if one looks at the notion of *impegno* from a rather different perspective, one point of view which has to take into account the evolution Italian society has been through. The author himself thus discusses his role in terms of commitment:

Essere impegnato per me vuol dire far scoprire cosa significa seguire la propria natura e il proprio istinto, saper essere sinceri con se stessi e pieni di desiderio e di voglia di amare e di cambiare il mondo, anche se io non posso dire in che modo.³⁶

This same passage has been quoted by Burns in her *Fragments of Impegno*: in the chapter devoted to Tondelli, she defines the writer's approach to the issue of commitment as 'different',³⁷ insomuch as he is torn between the desire to express social principles through his narrative and the impossibility to speak of *impegno* after the linguistic and thematic revolution undergone by literature in the 1970s.³⁸ Burns underlines how Tondelli lacks a proper vocabulary to express the responsibility he feels towards the members of his generation, which forces him to find an alternative way to convey it: the *Progetto Under 25* 'adds a perhaps surprising dimension to Tondelli's *impegno*'³⁹ and, in the writer's words, 'è un po' la risposta al mio problema di impegno culturale'.⁴⁰ The *Progetto Under 25* is exemplary of the author's willingness to assist young male and female writers in their early careers, giving them the chance to publish, but I would argue that this project fits in smoothly in Tondelli's own process of coming of age. In other words, the young Tondelli of *Altri libertini* and *Pao Pao* observes Italian youth from an internal point of view: he considers the act of writing as an act of self-clarification, as part and parcel of the process of coming of age. On the other hand, Tondelli the man, the adult, does not cut the connection he has established with the young world; on the contrary, he acts culturally in order to transfer the relationship between identity and writing to another generation. In the introduction to the first volume of *Opere*, the editor

³⁶ Panzeri, *Il mestiere di scrittore*, p. 990.

³⁷ The chapter in which Burns investigates Tondelli's novels and projects is in fact entitled 'Pier Vittorio Tondelli: A Different Approach'.

³⁸ See Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio, eds., *Speaking Out and Silencing: Culture, Society and Politics in Italy in the 1970s* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006).

³⁹ Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, p. 121.

⁴⁰ Panzeri, *Il mestiere di scrittore*, p. 990.

Fulvio Panzeri explains how the act of writing and identity are entwined in Tondelli's life:

Come pochi altri scrittori, in Tondelli l'esperienza di sé, nella personale forma della riflessione, diviene il fondamento della scrittura. La narrazione progredisce attraverso la scoperta di una coscienza (che è anche esperienza) di quelle tappe che rappresentano le 'misure di tempo' di altre età, intuite come veri e propri riti di passaggio. Così anche i suoi libri sembrano porsi come capisaldi di questa progressione.⁴¹

Tondelli's works mark, similarly to rites of passage, his process of coming of age and are direct expressions of the progressive maturation of his own identity. In terms of commitment, therefore, Tondelli's writing can be read as losing the connection with ideology – thus following the thread begun in the 1960s and theorised by Burns – and reconfiguring the notion of *impegno* on a social and personal rather than political level. According to Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug, in the postmodern era, commitment in art forms a “thick relationship”, in which the individual establishes, first of all, an engagement with the “other” (lower case), meaning the “neighbour”, rather than the “collective”, or hypostasized, phantasmatic “Other”, in Lacanian or Levinasian terms'.⁴² Further to this interpretation of postmodern forms of commitment, I would read the process of coming of age, negotiated with the other, as an individualised and personal expression of *impegno*, one that, in Critchley's words, considers and attributes relevance to the ‘multiple singularities of the encounter with others that defines the experience of sociability’.⁴³

I have argued that the term ‘generational’ has been used by critics to address both content and style in Tondelli's works: however, I would say that the notion could be extended to include the historical and social background – that ‘sottotesto’⁴⁴ to the novels represented by the corpus of articles and reflections then organically collected in *Un weekend postmoderno* – and also Tondelli's belonging to the generation he describes. As Eugenio Bolongaro points out in an article on *Camere separate*, critics of Tondelli should be divided

⁴¹ Fulvio Panzeri, ‘Pianura progressiva’, in *Pier Vittorio Tondelli: Opere: Romanzi, teatro, racconti*, ed. by Fulvio Panzeri (Milan: Bompiani, 2000), pp. VII–XXX (p. XIX).

⁴² Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug, ‘Introduction’, in *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 1–29 (p. 11).

⁴³ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 123.

⁴⁴ Panzeri, *Il mestiere di scrittore*, p. 992.

into two groups: on the one hand, there are those interested in historical and biographical aspects, who promote an image of the author as an '*operatore culturale*' who actively supports new readers and writers. On the other hand, there is a more properly literary focus on Tondelli's artistic value in the scenario of Italian literature in the eighties and nineties, highlighting the merit of having brought to the foreground 'the sensibility and outlook of a new generation of Italians, a generation which rejected strong ideological commitments and adopted a much more pragmatic/uninhibited/opportunistic approach to sociality, culture, and the marketplace'.⁴⁵ 'Youth' is a key theme in Pier Vittorio Tondelli's writing which connotes both his persona and his works, making him a truly generational author. Firstly, he debuts as a young writer, being twenty-five years old when *Altri libertini* gets published; secondly, he has a special relationship with young readers, who identify with the narrative world he creates;⁴⁶ finally, he writes about youth and the problems and situations which affect young people.⁴⁷

It is indeed thanks to Tondelli's interest in giving the young a voice in adult society that Culicchia – the second writer under analysis in this work –

⁴⁵ Eugenio Bolongaro, 'Leo's Passion: Suffering and the Homosexual Body in Pier Vittorio Tondelli's *Camere Separate*', *Italian Studies*, 62 (2007), 95–111 (pp. 95–96).

⁴⁶ Tondelli's 'relationship' with his readers is testified by the collection of letters and statements collected by Enos Rota. See Enos Rota, *Caro Pier: I lettori di Tondelli: Ritratto di una generazione* (Milan: Selene Edizioni, 2002).

⁴⁷ Roberto Carnero has defined Tondelli as 'uno scrittore generazionale', because 'oltre a essere giovane (nel 1980 ha venticinque anni) è uno scrittore particolarmente letto dai giovani, di cui, soprattutto nei primi due libri, rappresenta la vita, i problemi, le ansie, le frustrazioni, gli entusiasmi'. See Roberto Carnero, 'Dalla "letteratura emotiva" alla "letteratura interiore": L'itinerario narrativo in Pier Vittorio Tondelli', *Critica letteraria*, 97 (1997), 739–86 (p. 744). A similar opinion is expressed by Diego Zancani, who suggests: 'Pier Vittorio Tondelli is a writer liked by the young, who have responded to the colloquial style of his early works, recognizing in it many of the elements of their own everyday speech [...]. They also recognized in Tondelli's early writing an attempt to replace abstractions, ideologies and theorizations with straightforward emotions.' See Diego Zancani, 'Pier Vittorio Tondelli: The Calm After the Storm', in *The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt Baranski and Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 219–38 (p. 220). With regard to the depiction of Tondelli's writings as coming of age narratives, it is interesting to report, apart from Mondello's reading – already quoted – Carnero's identification in several short stories from *Altri libertini* of 'la struttura e gli intenti del *Bildungsroman*' (Carnero, 'Dalla "letteratura emotiva" alla "letteratura interiore"', p. 751). *Camere separate* – analysed in Chapter Four – has also been 'labelled' as a coming of age narrative: Marino Sinibaldi defines the novel 'il rendiconto di uno sforzo di ricostruzione dell'identità, di formazione [...] di una personalità', which assumes «i tratti [...] del romanzo di formazione» - See Marino Sinibaldi, 'So Glad to Grow Older', *Panta*, 9 (1992), 109–16 (pp. 109–10). A further reference to the interpretation of *Camere separate* in the light of the *Bildungsroman* comes from Fulvio Panzeri ('si potrebbe parlare di romanzo di formazione') – See Panzeri, *Pianura progressiva*, p. XXVII. Elena Buia reads the novel's final episodes as implying the possibility for the protagonist Leo to eventually find his real self. Also see Elena Buia, *Verso casa: Viaggio nella narrativa di Pier Vittorio Tondelli* (Ravenna: Fernandel, 1999), p. 11.

started his career in 1990. Born in 1965 in Torino, Culicchia published his first short stories in the third volume edited by Tondelli as part of the *Progetto Under 25, Papergang*.⁴⁸ Having previously sent ten stories to Tondelli, who, in a column on the magazine *Rockstar* had asked young people for their writings, he succeeded in getting five of them published. The other five, as Culicchia tells in an interview on the Rai website, become – after being re-elaborated – his first novel, *Tutti giù per terra* (1994).⁴⁹ The novel, together with *Paso Doble* (1995) and, partly *Bla bla bla* (1997), is a portrait of youth condition in the 1990s. In this regard, Mondello noticed how, in the 1990s, ‘la condizione giovanile si fa letteratura con una forza e una violenza d’impatto del tutto inediti nel decennio precedente’, despite the groundbreaking works by Tondelli and the interest in youth demonstrated by other writers, including Veronesi (the third author analysed in this study).⁵⁰ Mondello often overlaps the terms *romanzo di formazione* and *romanzo generazionale*, while I would argue that they actually belong to two different literary genres.

Coming back to Culicchia, his prolific career as a writer – he has so far published thirteen novels – is accompanied by his collaborations with newspapers and magazines and his work as a translator. Among them, I will remember here *Il paese delle meraviglie* (2004) – which could be considered a *romanzo di formazione* – *Brucia la città* (2009), *Ameni inganni* (2011) – both analysed in this work, respectively in Chapter Three and Chapter Four – and the recently published *Venere in metrò* (2012).⁵¹ Sandro Veronesi, the third and last writer in this study, similar to Culicchia, collaborates with newspapers and magazines and, together with a successful career as writer, he is also the co-founder with Domenico Procacci of the publishing house Fandango. Born in 1959 in Prato, Veronesi belongs – biographically – to the same generation as Tondelli; however, his literary debut came only in 1988 with *Per dove parte questo treno allegro*, making him and his narrative more akin to the 1990s generational literature discussed above in relation to Culicchia. After this first literary attempt, he published the novel *Gli sfiorati* (1990) – analysed in Chapter

⁴⁸ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, ed., *Papergang* (Massa: Transeuropa, 1990).

⁴⁹ Interview with Giuseppe Culicchia, ‘I miei primi racconti li ha pubblicati Tondelli’, <<http://www.letteratura.rai.it/articoli/i-miei-primi-racconti-li-ha-pubblicati-tondelli/57/default.aspx>>, [accessed 20 February 2013]

⁵⁰ Mondello, *In principio fu Tondelli*, p. 90.

⁵¹ For a detailed list of Culicchia’s published works and his collaboration with magazines and newspapers, see the biography section on his website: <http://www.giuseppeculicchia.it/biografia/> [accessed 10 November 2009].

Three – *Venite venite B-52* (1995), *La forza del passato* (2000), and won the *Premio Strega* with the novel *Caos calmo* (2005). A prolific author of non-narrative prose, he also works with the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. From a cultural and literary perspective, Veronesi is an important figure in contemporary Italy: he collaborated with Tondelli not only on the creation of the literary journal *Panta*, but was also on the editorial board of *Nuovi argomenti* in the 1980s, sharing with Tondelli the desire to allow young people a place to be published.

Scholarly work on Culicchia and Veronesi is lacking and, therefore, this introduction to the authors will seem to be prevalently focused on Tondelli. While I agree with Mondello in acknowledging the groundbreaking role played by Tondelli in paving the way to increasing attention to youth and young people's lives in literature – followed by a blurring between high and low culture – my work fits precisely in this research gap by studying with a comparative approach some of the works produced by these three authors and by reading them from the perspective of the *Bildungsroman* genre. My aim is also to avoid any categorisation: on the contrary, I wish to offer an original point of view to think of texts which, too often, have only been labelled as generational products by young authors. In an article in the newspaper *L'Unità*, Veronesi calls for a different critical approach which should avoid judging writers for their belonging to the younger age group ('Ma smettetela di chiamarci giovani scrittori'), in order to revitalise a critical discourse which seems unable to tackle contemporary literature.⁵² With my work I wish to answer this call. Even though this study does not aim to be an exhaustive analysis of contemporary Italian literature, it does aim to rejuvenate the discourse around contemporary narrative, interrogating our understanding of a pivotal stage of life such as the transition from youth to adulthood. What is the value of coming of age in Italian contemporary society? How does the economic crisis affect young people's path towards a mature identity? And how does it affect its narrative representation? If, as I argue, the coming of age process becomes a 'delaying of age' in contemporary Italy, what are the causes of this change? While sociological works will show, in Chapter Two, that postmodern society is unable to offer younger generations a financially stable future, limiting their options in the coming of age process and

⁵² Sandro Veronesi, 'Ma smettetela di chiamarci giovani scrittori', *L'Unità*, 8 April 1995.

affecting the way they conceive adult status, I ask whether there is still a place for individual and autonomous choice in the process of identification. These questions will drive my analysis of the coming of age pattern in seven contemporary novels published in Italy between 1980 and 2011, showing that, paradoxically, narrative representation leaves room for a different interpretation.

Structure of the Work

The close textual analysis of the corpus of works selected in my study will be based on an interdisciplinary methodology, which draws on social and cultural Italian studies and, at the same time, on a psychoanalytical reading of the novels analysed. In Chapter One, I will trace the origins of the *Bildungsroman*; highlighting the steps involved in the process of coming of age of the traditional protagonist of the genre, I will then focus on the development of this narrative in the twentieth century. My discussion will take two parallel directions: on the one hand, I will study the changes undergone by the genre over the centuries; on the other hand, I will follow the increasing importance acquired by youth within society. The first point will gravitate around Franco Moretti's pivotal work on the coming of age narrative in Europe, *The Way of the World*. Despite acknowledging the importance of Moretti's study in the contemporary literary panorama, I will oppose his arguing for the inevitable end of the genre in conjunction with the First World War. To support my thesis of a continuation of the genre in the twentieth century, I will provide examples of Italian narratives which engage with the coming of age trope, underlining their differences from the *Bildungsroman* and the elements shared with the traditional literary genre. The study of youth will be based on John Gillis's *Youth and History* and will be strictly intertwined with the analysis of young masculinities and the shaping of male identity in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁵³ The aim of this section is to highlight the powerful imagery created during the two World Wars and the Fascist years in depicting young male individuals and in shaping their identification within society.

Chapter Two will partly follow on the discussion initiated in Chapter One, since youth and Italian society will be its main protagonists. I will explore the

⁵³ John R. Gillis, *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations 1770–Present* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

relationship between narrative representations of coming of age (or 'delaying of age') and their counterparts in Italian society. The purpose of the chapter will be that of situating my literary analysis within a precise framework of reference, with the purpose of detailing a picture of contemporary Italy to include the discussion of generation, family environment and gender roles, work opportunities, and consumption patterns. These concepts will be investigated against the background of Italian society from the aftermath of the Second World War. I will argue that young Italian men and women have been affected in their process of identification and coming of age by a major 'revolution' within the family, which has caused a disruption of previous gender roles. Torn between a patriarchal model of society and the will for change expressed by the second wave feminist movement, young men's search for role models within society is further complicated by the period of social upheaval which took hold of young people in 1968. By highlighting the increasing importance of generation and the peer group in validating young men's identity, I will then introduce a theme which will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Three: the generational coming of age. The role of family in the process of transition from youth to adulthood is another important element of consideration in this chapter, where I will bring to the fore the discussions around the *lunga gioventù* phenomenon. Finally, I will touch on the problem of *precarietà* (work instability) among young people in Italy and the connection between identity and consumption, which will provide the basis for my analysis of Culicchia's works in Chapters Three (*Brucia la città*) and Four (*Tutti giù per terra* and *Paso Doble*). In the conclusion to this chapter, I will argue that, due to the precarious conditions in contemporary Italian society which affect, especially but not exclusively, young people, we can witness new modes of coming of age: in this sense, postponing adulthood and the retreat into adolescence (the 'delaying of age') seem to be the Italian response to the traditional coming of age pattern.

Chapters Three and Four will be devoted to the analysis of primary sources: within the framework of the 'delaying of age' as a specific Italian way of coming of age in contemporary society, I will differentiate two main interpretative currents. The first, in Chapter Three, will interpret the delaying of age as a generational coming of age. At the base of my analysis is Juliet MacCannell's work on the idea of brotherhood as the social configuration that,

in contemporary society, is gradually replacing patriarchy.⁵⁴ If becoming an adult man is no longer considered the aim of the coming of age process, the transition from youth to adulthood is substituted by an inclusion within the generational group, in which peers play the fundamental role of validating one's identity. Tondelli's *Altri libertini*, Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati* and Culicchia's *Brucia la città* will be read as examples of this specific form of delaying of age which implies the marginalisation of the young male protagonists from adult society. In Tondelli's novel I will, more specifically, focus on the short story 'Viaggio', in which marginalisation is represented as a challenge to normative society, which does not accept young people's behaviours in a period of social upheaval such as the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Furthermore, marginalisation is also the consequence of sexual choices: homosexuality, and in this sense, sexual identity are only accepted within the peer group, making it impossible for these men to balance traditional forms of coming of age with sexual preferences. Sexual and gender identity are, for the generation narrated by Tondelli, 'performed' according to those role models who are no longer identified in the adult society, but, on the contrary within the generational group (the Regime of the Brother).⁵⁵

In Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati*, the protagonist, Mète, embodies the difficult process of coming of age that his generation is facing in the late 1990s. The young man, in fact, is not able to either adapt to and assume an adult role within society or to completely share the beliefs and lifestyle of his generation. Constantly torn between the desire to accept responsibilities for his own actions and the sexual desire for his half-sister, he is trapped in an erotic triangle which I will analyse with the help of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's studies on homosocial desire and Freud's theory on Oedipal desire.⁵⁶

The last novel analysed in Chapter Three, Culicchia's *Brucia la città*, is set at the beginning of the new millennium showing a different perspective on the generational coming of age. Here, in fact, the connection between identity and consumerism that, as I have already argued and I will expand upon in Chapter Two, fosters youth identity in contemporary society is made stronger by the

⁵⁴ Juliet MacCannell, *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁵⁵ My analysis will be backed up by Judith Butler's work on gender performativity. See Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1 (1993), 17–32.

⁵⁶ See Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

narcissistic attitude which seems to characterise the younger generation. Freud's study of narcissism, together with more recent analysis conducted by Christopher Lasch, will work as the framework of my textual reading.⁵⁷

In Chapter Four, the delaying of age will be analysed as it develops in couple relationships and for the single individuals involved. The analysis of Tondelli's *Camere separate* will focus on the process of coming of age as connected with the process of coming out for the homosexual protagonist of the novel, Leo. The delaying of age becomes, therefore, a symptom of a more general impossibility to express homosexual identity within society. By treating homosexuality 'as an aspect of subjectivity rather than as an activity',⁵⁸ Tondelli puts it in a cultural and social context that does not leave room for the articulation of dissident identities. Furthermore, the loss of the love object – Leo's lover Thomas – and the consequent melancholic attachment that characterises homosexuality more generally will be analysed through a reading of the text coming again from the studies of Freud and Judith Butler.⁵⁹

The protagonists of the four texts analysed in Chapter Four share a common sense of inadequacy within society, which is often transformed into the desire to challenge social norms, making the delaying of age a conscious choice, namely that of opposing society as a way of contrasting the *precarietà* of their identities. Whereas in *Camere separate* the process of 'delaying of age' can be read as a way to challenge a heteronormative society, in Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra* and *Paso Doble* the 'delaying of age' of the protagonist becomes a conscious postponement of adulthood as to avoid a forceful integration within society. By looking at the idea of *precarietà* in both work and romantic relationships, I will argue that, as in *Camere separate*, the process of coming of age is connected to the artistic maturation of the protagonist. If Leo, in Tondelli's novel, seemed to overcome the impasse by finding his *raison d'être* in the process of writing, Walter's recognition of his creative identity – his *Künstlerroman* – becomes an

⁵⁷ See Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by John Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 73–102. Also see Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton & Company, 1979).

⁵⁸ Derek Duncan, *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 127–28.

⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', in *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 12–66. Also see Judith Butler, 'Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification', in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. by Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 21–36.

impossible objective. My analysis of the novel will find its sociological framework in Chapter Two, where I will discuss issues of *precarietà* within the work environment; furthermore, the protagonist's romantic relationships and their influence on his transition towards adulthood will be discussed in light of the studies on postmodern identities conducted by Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens.⁶⁰

Finally, the reading of the last novel in this work, Culicchia's *Ameni inganni*, will touch on issues of family and romantic relationships. By focusing on the strong bond between mother and son developed in the novel, I will start from Chodorow's research on mothering, to then consider the difficulty, for the male protagonist, of establishing relationships with women. Issues of *mammismo* will underpin my analysis, together with a reflection on male identity in the context of pornography, seen, for the problematic process of identification at the centre of the novel, as the only way to secure male identity in the relationship with the other sex.⁶¹

In the following four chapters, I aim to provide a clear picture of the way in which the coming of age trope – as developed with the traditional *Bildungsroman* – is narrated in contemporary Italy by three writers who, I would argue, have the merit of offering a wide range of possibilities and developments of the genre. Through the *fil rouge* of a 'delaying of age' strategy – as a specifically Italian way to (or not to) transition from youth to adulthood – I wish to offer a non-monolithic depiction of Italian masculinity, highlighting the variety of the process of becoming man.

⁶⁰ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003). Also see Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (London: Polity Press, 1992).

⁶¹ My analysis will be backed up by the following works: Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Andy Moe, 'Pornography', in *The Sexuality of Men*, ed. by Andy Metcalf and Martin Humphries (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 44–69. Feona Attwood's work on pornography will also be important.

Chapter One

Shaping the Literary Genre: Tracing the Origins of the *Bildungsroman*

Although the *Bildungsroman* has been part of the German literary canon since the end of the 1700s, the genre has developed over the centuries, influenced by different cultures and literary traditions. In this chapter, I will attempt to give evidence of this evolution: by drawing attention to the narrative structure of the coming of age novel, in particular to its protagonist, the young man, I will see how youth evolves in relation to different historical periods and a precise geographical and social setting, which is the Italian context. In the first section, I will define the literary genre and will study the increasing importance acquired by the young during modernity. In the second part of this chapter, I will discuss one of the most influent studies on the *Bildungsroman* – Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World* – and will analyse the connection between youth and masculinity in the first decades of the twentieth century, making special reference to the World Wars and the Fascist rhetoric on male virility and the body.

A Man in the World: The Traditional Coming of Age

The term *Bildungsroman* has traditionally been used to define a corpus of novels which developed in Germany in the last thirty years of the eighteenth century: the word passed into English thanks to the translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* by Thomas Carlyle,¹ and the work by Goethe has been canonically identified as the first example of this literary genre. As the name suggests, novels classified as *Bildungsroman* have in common a narrative structure, the process of *Bildung* which has passed through various interpretations and which has changed its own meaning over the decades. Originally conceived as 'God's active transformation of the passive Christian' both in the medieval mystics' thought and by the Pietists in the eighteenth century, the concept of *Bildung* gradually lost this passive meaning to acquire,

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels* (London: Chapman Hall, 1858). The novel was published by Goethe in 1795–96.

at the turn of the nineteenth century, a more active and widespread significance, which designates the interaction of the individual with his environment, stressing consequently 'the development of one's unique self'.²

The first application of the term in conjunction with the German *Roman* (the theory of the novel) is usually attributed to Wilhelm Dilthey; even though Fritz Martin's archival research has shown that '*Bildungsroman*' was coined by Karl von Morgenstern in 1819, it is Dilthey's definition of the genre which has given rise to the general meaning to which critics still refer. It is interesting to linger briefly over this point and to give account of these two theoretical perspectives. In Morgenstern's opinion, the *Bildungsroman* performs a double role, as this literary genre combines both rigorous formal aspects and a social function; as a matter of fact, the process of *Bildung* does not concern only the fictional character, but it also implies an attention towards the development of the reader's identity:

[i]t could well be called the *Bildungsroman*, first and foremost because of its inception and continuation until a certain stage of completion; secondly, however, because precisely through this presentation it encourages the cultivation of the reader more fully than any other type of novel.³

Furthermore, the process of *Bildung* displays a pedagogical attitude: referring to Klinger's work (but without explicitly naming him), Morgenstern underlines the necessity for the *Bildungsroman* to provide a 'masculine strength of character', which has to shape not only the fictional protagonist, but also young people (readers) in the public scene, 'in a time in which Europe needs men' (Martini, p. 11).

Whereas for Morgenstern this kind of literary work seems to lose its aesthetic value and to mainly focus on non-literary aspects, such as the formation of the reader thanks to the reception of the work of art, in Dilthey's analysis the use of the term *Bildungsroman* is strongly connected to the novel by Goethe which, from then on, was considered the seminal text of the genre. Thus, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* becomes the archetype of the genre, providing

² Todd Kontjie, *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre* (Columbia: Camden House, 1993), pp. 1–2.

³ Karl von Morgenstern, 'Über das Wesen Des Bildungsromans' (On the Nature of the Bildungsroman), quoted in Fritz Martini, 'Bildungsroman – Term and Theory', in *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, ed. by James N. Hardin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 1–25 (p. 18).

a more or less fixed model which has inspired subsequent *Bildungsroman* novels, that of a young man,

who enters into life in a blissful state of ignorance, seeks related souls, experiences friendship and love, struggles with the hard realities of the world and thus armed with a variety of experience, matures, finds himself and his mission in the world.⁴

As Dilthey suggests in his definition, there are two elements which play a pivotal role in the *Bildungsroman*: the young individual and the world in which he operates. The use of the masculine pronoun 'he' here is intentional, as the protagonist of the traditional *Bildungsroman* is a male one, since the process of coming of age is precluded for women. As Moretti puts it, in fact, the reason for this exclusion

lies in the very elements that characterize the *Bildungsroman* as a form: wide cultural formation, professional mobility, full social freedom – for a long time, the west European middle-class man held a virtual monopoly on these, which made him a sort of cultural *sine qua non* of the genre.⁵

Even though a female *Bildungsroman* has been identified in English literature (see, for instance, Jane Austen's and Charlotte Brontë's works), in other Western literature young women's exclusion is justified with a lack of personal independence and a consequent minor mobility: 'the greater the mobility in adolescence' – Michael Mitterauer argues – 'the greater the likelihood of an independent personality developing. [...] Here again there were differences between males and females. For reasons of morality, girls always had far less scope.'⁶

The resolution to focus my research on the process of *Bildung* accomplished by the male protagonist of selected contemporary novels, thus, seems to be justified by the forced absence from the public world which has affected young women for centuries and which has been well depicted in traditional coming of age novels. This position, however, becomes increasingly untenable when I extend the object of study to recent literary production: female

⁴ William Dilthey, quoted in James N. Hardin, 'Introduction', in *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, ed. by James N. Hardin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. IX–XXVII (p. XIV).

⁵ Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p. IX.

⁶ Michael Mitterauer, *A History of Youth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 28–29.

heroes are, in fact, more represented within the literary world, symbolising the recognition of women as social subjects, owners of both a public and literary existence. Nevertheless, in the majority of novels taken into account in my research the protagonist role is played by young men, while women are often presented as secondary elements of the narration. I am particularly interested in the process of acquiring a male identity, because I would argue that, despite the *Bildungsroman* having been and still being a predominantly 'male' genre, critical studies of it lack a specifically male gender perspective, which is, on the contrary, the prerequisite of studies on the female *Bildungsroman*. In other words, my research aims to shed light on the process of coming of age for young men as not only a transition towards adulthood, but as a gendered acquisition of identity.

The recurrence of male characters as primary figures of interest in my corpus of novels will lead me to explore certain important conceptual knots, which I aim to gradually untie in the development of my study. Is this male predominance, already identified as a peculiar feature of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, still an element of central interest in the legacy of the genre? Are genre and gender, in this regard, mutually connected? How do gender, sexuality and narrative entwine with the cultural and social context of Italy from the 1980s to the present? And, in conclusion, how did the male role evolve over the decades, especially in his relationship with his female counterpart (to what extent are women considered allies, antagonists, or invisible)? These questions – among the others that I have already outlined in the Introduction to this study – form the path I propose to follow in my research.

Despite my interest lying specifically in novels of male becoming, I will briefly outline here a few cases in which critics have worked on female dynamics of maturation. From a specifically Italian perspective, Summerfield and Downward's recent study on the European *Bildungsroman*, for instance, partly focuses on a gendered (female) reading of Neera's novels (*Teresa*, *Lydia* and *L'indomani*), Aleramo's *Una donna*, and Tamaro's *Va' dove ti porta il cuore*.⁷ Furthermore, in the already quoted collection on *Il romanzo di formazione nell'Ottocento e nel Novecento* critics do engage with the representation of female identities in the literary genre: multiple contributions, in

⁷ See the second section of Summerfield and Downward, *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman*.

fact, study the coming of age narrative produced by women and/or with female protagonists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸ With regards to the period 1980–2011, which is relevant to my research, however, there are virtually no specific studies on the female *Bildungsroman*, even though female writers have engaged with the coming of age narrative. In studies on contemporary Italian narrative such as Barilli's *E' arrivata la terza ondata* there is an acknowledgement of contemporary female authors and their dealing with the coming of age pattern, but their analysis is part of a more general 'survey' of contemporary Italian literature trends.⁹ Examples of recent female coming of age narratives are *Acciaio* (2010), by Silvia Avallone and the two books of the cycle *L'amica geniale* by Elena Ferrante (*L'amica geniale*, 2011 and *Storia del nuovo cognome*, 2012). This lack of critical attention on the contemporary female *Bildungsroman* is, I would argue, a consequence of the difficulty in dealing with contemporary literature already identified and discussed in the Introduction to this work. With my research, I am attempting to overcome this critical impasse: my decision to examine the genre from a male perspective, as I have already suggested in the Introduction, has two main reasons. First of all, since traditionally the genre has featured a male protagonist, I am interested in seeing how masculinity, which has been central to the genre's canonical evolution, is represented in a contemporary Italian context. Furthermore, this perspective would allow me to adopt a very specific approach to the genre, making this work not only a study of contemporary Italian literature, but also an examination of the representation of masculinity in Italy.

Coming back to the historical and literary reconstruction of the genre, I would highlight the interweaving of individual subject and literary and para-literary world, which remains, as I will show later on, a constant element of the genre. In other words, in the age of Goethe the hero was followed by the narrator (and consequently by the reader) in his quest for a stable and definite integration within adult society. The relationship between the young man and the world was indeed shaped by this ceaseless search for a mature identity,

⁸ Just to list here a few of the female writers studied in this text: Dacia Maraini, Elsa Morante, Grazia Deledda, Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, Anna Maria Ortese, and Lalla Romano. For a more detailed discussion, see *Il romanzo di formazione*, ed. by Papini, Fioretti, and Spignoli.

⁹ With regards to the *scritture femminili*, Barilli makes reference to Ballestra's *La guerra degli Antò* (1992), which, however, narrates a male coming of age, and Campo's works, such as *In principio erano le mutande* (1992), *Il pieno di super* (1993), and *Mai sentita così bene* (1995). See Renato Barilli, *E' arrivata la terza ondata. Dalla neo alla neo-avanguardia* (Turin: Testo & Immagine, 2000).

and the process of formation ascribed a positive value to the social context, seen as a compulsory element of self-development. Germanist Cesare Giacobazzi gives a clear definition of the *Bildungsroman* as constituted by the narration of the protagonist's biographical experiences, which lead him to form and shape his individuality.¹⁰ This assertion brings to the fore a feature of particular importance in the traditional form of the coming of age novel and in its subsequent development: the attention for the individual *per se*, which is rooted in the connection between the novel and its social background, and that, as I have already noted in the Introduction, is also a pivotal issue of contemporary Italian literature.

My study of the *Bildungsroman* focuses on the protagonist's identity as one of the central features of the literary genre; however, my research will not be separated from a thorough consideration of the context surrounding the work of art, meaning both fictional and real world. Previous research on the *Bildungsroman* has adopted this approach; in this regard, Mikhail Bakhtin, in his study of the genre written between 1936 and 1938, highlights the parallel development of both the hero and the historical context as a distinctive feature of the *Erziehungsroman* or *Bildungsroman*:

He [the hero] emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other.¹¹

The narrative core of the literary genre in its traditional form and its contemporary representation is, thus, 'the image of *man in the process of becoming*' (Bakhtin, p. 19); however, the way in which the individual undertakes the transition from youth to adulthood evolves in accordance with social and cultural changes. Therefore, Bakhtin himself states the necessity of tying fictional and real worlds in the novel, and from his point of view the protagonist epitomises the evolution of a society that is seeking a stable configuration. It is

¹⁰ In Giacobazzi's opinion the *Bildungsroman* is a novel that 'narra le vicende biografiche di un eroe che, attraverso esperienze eterogenee, raggiunge l'obiettivo di dare una forma organica, razionale e compiuta alla propria individualità'. Cesare Giacobazzi, *L'eroe imperfetto e la sua virtuosa debolezza: La correlazione tra funzione estetica e funzione formativa nel Bildungsroman* (Modena: Guaraldi, 2001), p. 49.

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 10–59 (p. 23).

indeed this connection between the individual (the hero) and the world that evolves over the centuries.

Youth and the Invention of Adolescence

To assess the value of the *Bildungsroman* within the literary canon of the Western novel, it is necessary to acknowledge the merit of the genre in casting light on what, until the end of the eighteenth century, was considered a social minority: the younger generation. Introducing a new hero, the young man, and seeing 'youth as the most meaningful part of life',¹² the *Bildungsroman* gave voice to a part of society that, until then, was utterly ignored by the literary world. Whereas during the eighteenth century, youth was considered as an 'invisible' and 'insignificant' (Moretti, p. 4) phase of life, at the turn of the nineteenth century being young became a central stage of the process of becoming a man, depicted by the coming of age novel. Detaching himself from the traditional idea of coming of age, which implied a straight transition from childhood to adulthood, the young man was actively participating in his life, discovering the world and was free to experience reality and to gain abilities and knowledge within society. 'The growing influence of education' and 'the strengthening of bonds with generations' (Moretti, p. 5) made youth independent from childhood: even though young people were still dependent on the law of the father, they were increasingly able to choose their own path among multiple opportunities offered by modernity. In fact, according to Moretti, youth obtained its powerful social status together with modernity:

Europe plunges into modernity, but without possessing a *culture* of modernity. If youth, therefore, achieves its symbolic centrality, and the 'great narrative' of the *Bildungsroman* comes into being, this is because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to *modernity*. (Moretti, p. 5)

Industrialisation and urbanisation at the beginning of the nineteenth century changed society and, at the same time, contributed to shaping young people's lives: youth started to be labelled as a period of social transformation. While sons traditionally inherited the job of the father and, consequently, his social status, the new young man was allowed to explore all the possibilities that

¹² Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p. 3.

modernity had to offer and to build his own life. The aim of the process of growing up was still represented by the concept of success, which corresponded to fulfilment in both the private and the public sphere (and the two terms often overlapped): to become a man meant to become able to face everyday life with its responsibilities and tasks. The transition from youth to adulthood could be considered successful only when the new man was recognised by society and its institutions as a concrete public *persona*. Hence, the ability to financially support the family and to maintain strong social relationships were the requisites for being considered a member of adult society during the nineteenth century.

After its recognition as an independent phase of life in the 1800s, youth continued to draw the attention of society, undergoing a further development, which led the young man to a new awareness of his status. During the twentieth century, being young was seen as an achievement, a period of life which every middle-class man has the right to experience. One of the main causes of this further social division was the extension of the years dedicated to full-time education, which caused 'the raising of the school leaving-age', but also 'a genuine social tendency of parents to seek further training for their children – a trend which gained considerable momentum during the 1920s, regressed somewhat during the economic hardships of the 1930s, and then boomed after the Second World War'.¹³ The span of time which separated childhood from adulthood and which was until then termed as youth underwent a further segmentation with the creation of adolescence. Whereas at first 'the discovery of adolescence belonged to the middle classes', whose youth, already from the second half of the nineteenth century, was experiencing a more flexible relationship between freedom from and dependence on adult society, it is during the twentieth century that 'simultaneously in almost every country, the concept of adolescence was democratized, offered to, or rather required of, all the teenaged' (Gillis, p. 133). This partly explains why the protagonist of the coming of age novel in the first half of the twentieth century is often the well-to-do adolescent. Gillis' attempt to chronicle the vicissitudes of youth from the

¹³ Gillis, *Youth and History*, p. 134. Other factors announcing the institution of adolescence were within the family such as the reduction of fertility and fairer treatment of children, which, however, was not equally addressed to boys and girls; within society, there was an increasing attention to young people's consumption, which implied a revision of educational plans, leading, as I have just underlined, to wider access to secondary education.

1770s to 1960s is an exhaustive one, and it is worth consulting it for further research; however, for the purpose of my study, I will primarily refer to the discussion of adolescence, as, in my opinion, it casts light on some of the focal points of my discourse. As I have already stated, middle-class boys and girls were aware of their right to be an adolescent, to be free to experience life without the constraints of adult responsibilities. On the other hand, working-class young men perceived that as an imposition, 'with the result that for most of the period 1900–1950 the lines between conformity and delinquency were drawn along what were essentially class divisions' (Gillis, p. 134).

If delinquency was one of the effects of the birth of adolescence, another consequence was an increasing interference of adults in young people's lives, resulting in 'a state of dependence longer than that experienced by the previous generation' (Gillis, p. 102), which, in terms of coming of age, was seen as likely leading to a failure:

The worst educational feature of the earlier ideal was the tendency to make boys into men too soon; the worst feature of the other, paradoxically, was that in its efforts to achieve manliness by stressing the cardinal importance of playing games, it fell into the opposite error of failing to make boys into men at all.¹⁴

Therefore, what was conceived as an attempt to allow the young boy to make the most of his youth ended in obtaining the very opposite result, as 'the young were separated from those civil and social rights which were their only real protection against the elders'.¹⁵ Summarising Gillis' thought, some of the changes brought about by the invention of adolescence were the creation of a social moratorium which, on the one hand enabled youngsters to properly enjoy their status, but, on the other hand, subjugated them to parental control.

Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World: A Critique*

The scenario experienced by young people at the beginning of the twentieth century that I outlined above was shaken to the foundations by the outbreak of the First World War, which had a profound impact on society as a whole.

¹⁴ David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies on a Victorian Ideal* (London: John Murray, 1961), p. 238.

¹⁵ Gillis, *Youth and History*, p. 142.

Franco Moretti, in his study on the European *Bildungsroman* already quoted, controversially identifies in 1914 a moment of total disillusionment, which instead of opening a new season in the literary representation of youth, was, on the contrary, 'the cosmic coup de grâce' to the genre.¹⁶ Before explaining why I read Moretti's research as controversial, however, it is worth summarising his thought: according to the critic, the end of the *Bildungsroman* is marked by what he terms the late *Bildungsroman*, a group of novels that constitutes an extreme boundary in the development of the genre and that makes visible the decay of *Bildung's* inner significance.¹⁷ Moretti summarises the three main 'symbolic tasks' of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* novel to show how their change over the century has led to the end of the genre. The first task performed by the archetype of the genre was to represent youth through an unpredictable yet fixed process of transition to adulthood, which, therefore, had 'a clear beginning, and an unmistakable end' (Moretti, p. 230). Secondly, the narrative episode of the novel had to be structured around experience. For Moretti, the *Bildungsroman* novel is formed by a series of episodes that are not meaningful by themselves but become important because the protagonist attributes meaning to them, making them an experience which contributes towards his coming of age. In Moretti's words,

experience [...] refers to an acquisitive tendency. It implies growth, the expansion of self, and even a sort of 'experiment' performed with one's self. [...] the episode becomes an experience if the individual manages to give it a meaning that expands and strengthens his personality. (Moretti, p. 46)

Finally, the third task of the traditional literary genre was that of presenting an 'unheroic hero', of making normality and everyday life the centre of the narrative development.

After having outlined the characteristics of the genre, Moretti turns to the problems presented by the group of novels he calls the late *Bildungsroman*, aiming to support his idea of the end of the genre in conjunction with the First World War. I will follow his reasoning before presenting my interpretation and

¹⁶ Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p. 229.

¹⁷ Moretti includes in the corpus *Youth*, by Joseph Conrad (1889), *Tonio Kröger*, by Thomas Mann (1903), *The Perplexities of Young Törless*, by Robert Musil (1906), *Jacob von Gunten*, by Robert Walser (1909), *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, by Rainer Maria Rilke (1910), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, by James Joyce (1904–1914), and *Amerika*, by Franz Kafka (1911–1914).

proposing an alternative perspective from which to observe the continuation of the genre in the twentieth century. One of the problems identified by the literature scholar in the late examples of *Bildungsroman* is the increasing importance of institutions in the young protagonists' lives: '[w]hereas previous novels tended to personalize social relations, presenting them as relations among individuals', he argues, 'in the late *Bildungsroman* social institutions began to appear as such' (Moretti, p. 230). The protagonist's socialisation and his becoming part of adult society, thus, seem to be imposed by the institutions which surround him, but this process is no longer internalised by the subject. For instance, one of the most influential institutions in the process of coming of age, the school, becomes an agent of socialisation of the young man within society, but loses, at the same time, another of its formative means: 'the legitimization of the social system inside the mind of individuals' (Moretti, p. 230). In other words, the school does provide the means for the transition to adulthood, but no longer makes it clear why this transition has to be accomplished, therefore making the process of coming of age an externally imposed act.

The second problem brought to the fore by Moretti lies in adults' increasing loss of power in the process of maturation of the *Bildungsroman*'s protagonist. If adult figures have nothing left to teach young people, then, 'youth looks now for its meaning within itself: gravitating further and further away from adult age, and more and more toward adolescence, or preadolescence, or beyond' (Moretti, p. 231). Acknowledging that the late *Bildungsroman*'s protagonists are younger than their predecessors, he identifies the cause in a historical change of perspective, which makes 'regression' replace 'growth' as 'the relevant symbolic process' of the twentieth century (Moretti, p. 231). Furthermore, childhood works in the late *Bildungsroman* as a narrative metaphor for the new phenomenon of mass behaviour which took hold of Europe after the First World War, making Western society experience 'an anthropological reversal from the individual as an autonomous entity to the individual as mere member of a mass' (Moretti, p. 232).

At this point, Moretti brings together the two main problems outlined above with the three tasks of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, namely to narrate a complete process of transition towards adulthood, to present a protagonist able to transform narrative episodes in experience for his own process of coming of

age, and to represent normal everyday life, in order to highlight the structural inadequacies affecting the last examples of *Bildungsroman*. By basing his reasoning on a contemporary narratological framework, Moretti argues that the traditional *Bildungsroman* developed in a period of balancing between old and new trends in narrative. According to Barthes and Chatman, narrative episodes are formed by 'kernels' and 'satellites', the former being usually the hero's actions and decisions and the latter constituting the background of his actions.¹⁸ From the eighteenth century onwards, however, the narrative importance of these two components seemed to be overturned, with satellites becoming more central than kernels in the narrative structure: the *Bildungsroman* was born in this period of narrative change. We have said that, in this literary genre, narrative episodes become important according to the meaning the protagonist decides to give them; the hero of the coming of age novel is surrounded by opportunities, and has to make choices in order to transform these opportunities (background episodes, thus satellites) into actions (central episodes, thus kernels), which is to say to make them part of his experience of the world. This discourse is very important to understand the reasons behind the impossibility for Moretti in conceiving the *Bildungsroman* in twentieth-century literature. In the late *Bildungsroman*, Moretti notices that there is a fundamental 'shift in narrative agency' and 'opportunities turn into accidents: kernels are no longer produced by the hero as turning points of his free growth – but *against* him, by a world that is thoroughly indifferent to his personal development'.¹⁹ Instead of offering opportunities, society offers traumatic episodes to young heroes, which instead of helping his socialisation within the adult world, make him regress into childhood.

The introduction of traumas in the *Bildungsroman* narrative is, together with 'the collapse of Youth and Experience' described above, the further element which, according to Moretti, contributes to the dissolution of the genre. More specifically, Moretti also refers to the 'traumatic discoveries of sexual desires that are as a rule both socially illicit and psychically irresistible' and that 'pulverizes the only remaining cornerstone of the *Bildungsroman*: the unity of

¹⁸ According to Chatman, who translates Barthes's '*noyau*' with 'kernel', narrative events have 'a logic of *hierarchy*'. Therefore, kernels are 'narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by the events', while satellites 'entail no choice, but are solely the workings-out of the choices made at the kernels'. See Seymour Benjamin Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 53–54.

¹⁹ Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p. 233.

the Ego' (Moretti, p. 236). The development of a new alien reality – the unconscious –, Moretti argues, will become a fundamental element of twentieth-century literature, where it will be represented as intertwined with the constitution of the subject and his socialisation. However, he explains, the protagonists of the late *Bildungsroman* face the discovery of the unconscious without being able to overcome its destabilising effects and, therefore, leaving their process of growth incomplete. Moretti concludes his discussion by questioning the 'social function of literature', which, he maintains, lies in making 'symbolic forms' become 'problem-solving devices', which is to say 'the means through which the cultural tensions and paradoxes produced by social conflict and historical change are disentangled (or at least reduced)' (Moretti, pp. 243–44). The problem with the late *Bildungsroman* – and its representing the last phase of the literary genre – was exactly the impossibility for it to solve the problem it addressed, the coming of age of the protagonist in the face of the traumas imposed by society.

Moretti's reconstruction of the (non-)development of the *Bildungsroman* in the twentieth century has been challenged – even if not openly – by all those scholars (and writers) who have engaged with the coming of age narrative after the two World Wars.²⁰ By studying the development of the *Bildungsroman* in contemporary Italian literature, my research contrasts the idea of an end of the genre: in this section, I will show why I believe that it is still possible to speak of a coming of age narrative in twentieth-century literature, making specific reference to the corpus of texts I selected in this work. As we have seen, one of the main problems identified by Moretti in the late *Bildungsroman* is the loosening of individual relationships in favour of powerful social institutions which forcefully lead the protagonist in his process of maturation. The school for Kröger (Mann) and Törless (Musil), the Church for the protagonist of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* overcame, for instance, individual relationships as the main agent of socialisation, making their process of coming of age a coercive imposition, which does not leave room for the subject's will. In the coming of age narrative analysed in my research, however, the power of institutions seems to falter and be replaced by a renewed interest in individuals' relationships, which becomes the core of the process of socialisation and

²⁰ See, for instance, the general studies on the *Bildungsroman* in the twentieth century indicated in the Introduction to this work.

identification. As I will show in my analysis of the texts, but also in the historical/sociological background, the protagonists of the contemporary 'delaying of age' novel are aware of the coercive nature of social institutions and, therefore, delaying their entry into the adult world is a form of refusing those steps which society expects them to follow. In other words, I would argue that, in contemporary Italian narrative, there is a re-appropriation of subjectivity and personal decision in the process of coming of age, which, as we will see, began with the youth movements in 1968 (Chapter Two). Just to give a few examples here, before returning to this discussion in Chapters Three and Four, the young men depicted by Tondelli, Veronesi, and Culicchia attempt to avoid adult responsibilities because they do not see themselves represented by the society in which they live. The work environment, which replaces the school as one of the social institutions affecting these young men, is, for instance, avoided: Walter, the protagonist of Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra*, is afraid of becoming his father and of tying himself to an ordinary life, with a job that does not fulfil him. The school itself is considered by the *altri libertini* narrated by Tondelli, as unable to provide younger generations with the means to grow up as free individuals. The relationship with the other as the form of socialisation privileged by the *Bildungsroman* again becomes central in the 'delaying of age' novel.

In a society in which traumatic events and oppressive social institutions seem to make the transition towards adulthood difficult, Moretti explains, the protagonists of the *Bildungsroman* regress instead of growing: '[t]he adult world refuses to be a hospitable home for the subject? Then let childhood be' (Moretti, p. 231), he suggests. In the novels produced between and after the World Wars, therefore, writers have focused on children and their peer group, who become the subject of the coming of age process.²¹ As I have already highlighted in the Introduction, children are protagonists of some of the coming of age narrative works produced in contemporary Italy; however, in the corpus of texts by Tondelli, Veronesi, and Culicchia there is a return to the young adult protagonist: instead of a regression to childhood, these novels represent a postponement of adulthood. Since growing up is inevitable, the texts selected

²¹ I will show, in the following sections, that the coming of age narratives developed after the Second World War often have a young protagonist and follow him in a brief episode of his childhood, as, for instance, Moravia does in some of his novels. See Alberto Moravia, *Agostino* (Milan: Bompiani, 2007).

for my research deal with the consequences of an inhospitable adult world from the perspective of people who are at the edge of adulthood.

Another point raised by Moretti was the shift, in the late *Bildungsroman*'s structure, between kernels and satellites, namely between experience and opportunities. Society no longer provides opportunities (satellites) – which could become important experiences in his growing up process – to the young hero; on the contrary, it interferes in this process by introducing traumatic events (the war). In contemporary society, I argue, a similar lack of opportunities affects the protagonist of the coming of age novel, condemning the transition to adulthood to failure. However, I will show how these texts develop a new strategy to cope with the unwelcoming social milieu of contemporary Italy: the 'delaying of age'.

The final element that Moretti reads as destabilising the *Bildungsroman* form was the introduction of the unconscious. According to Moretti, the unconscious is responsible for the crumbling of 'the unity of the Ego' and therefore it prevents 'the *Bildungsroman* from playing a central role in the new phase of Western socialization' (Moretti, pp. 236–37). Moretti argues that the unconscious, which he also calls the Unknown, obstructs the coming of age of the subject without giving reliable solutions to the problem occurring during the process of becoming and therefore entailing the social function of literature in which Moretti believes.²² On the contrary, I would rather suggest that the unconscious is the very central element around which the process of coming of age takes place in the twentieth century: in other words, in order to acquire self-consciousness, the subject – the young hero – must come to terms with that unknown part of himself which he is in the process of discovering. Hence, the unconscious can correspond to the young part of one's individuality which has to be overcome, but that, more often, needs to be balanced against one's Ego in order to accomplish the transition towards a mature identity. Furthermore, Moretti links the unconscious to the emergence of sexual desire in the protagonist of the coming of age novel: being 'both illicit and psychically irresistible', this desire is often fulfilled (or attempted to be fulfilled) through the sexual initiation of the protagonist with a prostitute. This narrative episode will become a common trope in the coming of age narratives after World War II, as I will show later in this chapter. However, it is important here to notice that Moretti

²² We have seen that, according to Moretti, literature's function is that of solving the problems addressed in the narrative action.

considers the unconscious (and sexual desire) as 'an attempt to address and colonize' the process of socialisation of the protagonist. On the contrary, I would suggest that the role of the unconscious in twentieth-century literature is that of engaging the protagonist in a process of discovering his own identity. The Id (the unconscious) is, psychoanalytically, the place in which instinctual desires originate and, in the coming of age novels of the twentieth century, sexuality plays a pivotal role in defining the subject and in casting light on gender as an acquired term of definition of identity.

My reading of Moretti's pivotal work on the *Bildungsroman* does intend to oppose the ideas raised by the scholar with reference to the end of the literary genre in the twentieth century. Despite appreciating the changes undergone by the genre over the centuries and agreeing with Moretti on the necessity of being aware of a considerable difference between the traditional forms of the genre and its contemporary examples, I would, however, suggest that the process of transition towards adulthood remains a central narrative trope in many novels which deal with youth. In conclusion, if I consider the *Bildungsroman* as the literary representation of a world in which being recognised as an adult within society is the 'happy ending' of every process of growth, I must admit that a narrative of this kind is no longer possible. What cannot be neglected, however, is the survival of certain patterns of the coming of age novel, which still characterise literary embodiments of youth.

A Doomed Coming of Age? Young Men at War

The outbreak of the First World War had the merit of drawing the attention of European countries to the value of youth. Nevertheless, the new interest which society had in the young population was mainly driven by utilitarian purposes, first of all the employment of young men in the firing lines. The event of war could be considered as tragically responsible for a sudden change in power relations between adults and young people, as young people become a fundamental resource in wartime. Whereas at the beginning of the twentieth century the birth of adolescence reinforced the dependence of boys and girls upon parental figures and the control over their lives by adults, the world conflict seemed to re-ignite the flame of juvenile independence which was a central value for the young man of the nineteenth century, and, as I will show in

Chapter Two, was to regain a dramatic importance between the 1960s and the 1980s. While not neglecting the hard-hitting impact of the First World War on individuals and the support which part of society gave to neutral politics, I shall at the same time highlight that war had a seductive power for youth. According to Paola Magnarelli,

[n]el Novecento emerge infatti in misura tragica quel nesso tra giovinezza, difesa della patria e formazione virile sul quale la società occidentale si era modellata a partire dal secolo precedente, costruendo uno stereotipo di giovane guerriero in grado di condizionare gran parte della popolazione, non esclusa quella rappresentata dal movimento operaio.²³

The bond between virility and education dates back to the youth movements established at the turn of the century, for instance the Scouts, founded by Baden-Powell in the United Kingdom in 1904, and the *Wandervogel*, the leading German juvenile association from 1901: strictly structured around patriarchal principles, these youth groups were exclusively dedicated to a certain social class and gender. At least in the beginning, they aimed to gather middle-class male youth: if the social gap could be explained by expenses that, obviously, proletarian families could not afford, the gender division, and the consequent exclusion of girls, was justified as necessary to avoid 'premature contact with the opposite sex' which was believed to endanger both 'the domesticized femininity of girls' and the masculinity *in nuce* of boys.²⁴ In Italy, the Scout movement was established in the 1910s, suddenly interrupted during Fascism with the birth of groups affiliated to the regime, and reconstituted after the Second World War. According to Gillis, from the outset, these youth movements were imbued with nationalism, and they educated boys to face life with a military attitude: the hint of indoctrination lay behind war games and uniforms; participation in the First World War, thus, was prepared by that involvement in military matters which characterised young boys' free time.

Focusing again on the literary representation of youth, we should read Moretti's depiction of the war in the light of the social role played by young men in this historical period. Quoting the words of a German volunteer – 'No one

²³ Paola Magnarelli, 'I giovani e la guerra: Una relazione intima e complessa', in *Il secolo dei giovani: Le nuove generazioni e la storia del Novecento*, ed. by Paolo Sorcinelli and Angelo Varni (Rome: Donzelli, 2004), pp. 21–53 (p. 23).

²⁴ Gillis, *Youth and History*, p. 147.

shall come out of this war if not a different person' – the critic underlines the tough effect that this worldwide event had on individuals:

Rather than fulfilling the archetype, though, the war was to shatter it, because, unlike rites of passage, the war killed – and its only mystery didn't decree the renewal of individual existence, but its significance.²⁵

What Moretti seems not to take into account in his analysis is, in my opinion, the value that war had for many young men who were its main protagonists: in her study on youth and war already mentioned, Magnarelli underlines how veterans from the 1914–1918 conflict were keen to reflect on their experience in order to acquire a more conscious role within society. With this regard, the author uses the word *Erlebnis* (experience), which came to the fore in literature with the *Bildungsroman* and which was identified by Dilthey as the narrative unit underpinning this literary genre. Furthermore, as the war came to an end, an entire generation found itself questioning its *raison d'être* and its myths and needed to create, or better, to adopt new icons and to follow new social rules. The younger generation in the aftermath of the war was then forced to re-build its identity and, in doing so, it had to rely on a completely disrupted social framework. In a world in which beliefs became uncertainties, the *Bildungsroman* as the novel of youth, therefore, could only narrate an incomplete or doomed coming of age.

What made war a focal moment in the process of formation for young soldiers in the First World War and then in the Second World War was the creation of a strong feeling of camaraderie which spread amongst fellows sharing the same destiny. A similar situation was already detectable in the barracks, where the coming of age was marked by a parallel demonstration of gendered practices; the military service, which had the principal role of educating young men to face war also in peacetime, was therefore understood as a means of nationalisation and, I would add, as a training in masculinity. Conscription was first established in the nineteenth century and its compulsory nature had the merit of gathering men from different social and cultural backgrounds under the same national flag. Being part of the military system was seen, before and between the two wars, as mutually enforcing the soldier-citizen bond. However, during the 1960s it assumed negative connotations, as

²⁵ Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p. 229.

the compulsory element prevailed over the nationalistic one. The theme is central in one of the novels which, despite not being part of this study, share the sense of generational identity as expressed by Tondelli in his writing. In *Pao Pao* (1982), autobiographically, the author chronicles the years spent as a conscript in the 1980s, depicting them as a dramatic period of his life which obliged him to swap family and friends for senseless rules and forced camaraderie. However, despite the loss of that patriotic aim for which the military service was conceived, Tondelli does not deny the formative value of this experience, which he depicts as contributing massively to understanding his young identity. I would suggest that the main difference between how state and youth, especially from the aftermath of the Second World War onwards, conceive the military service lies in the value the young man attributes to the idea of *Erlebnis*: maturation and gender consciousness are no longer achieved by acting *as* men, but they are acquired by acting *among* men. A gendered generational pattern thus prevails over a formation imposed from on high.

Shaping Gender Roles During Fascism

If drills and the two World Wars played a central role in the process of coming of age of European young men in the twentieth century, the younger Italian generation between the two wars and during World War II underwent a further indoctrination in the years of the Fascist regime. The advent of Fascism marked a renewed attention to youth; nonetheless, the process of *Bildung* assumed the connotation of an external process, imposed by a superior entity – the dictatorial institution – and lost the traditional value of inner exploration and development. The regime was characterised by a plethora of virile figures and models specifically addressed to boys, with the aim of shaping their gender and national identities; the fascist educational purposes, thus, were basically conveyed through two fundamental organisations, whose aims and modalities often overlapped: youth associations and sport activities. Under certain circumstances, Fascist youth associations for boys were similar to those youth movements previously described (Scouts and *Wandervogel*) as they aimed to train young men along military principles; however, they differed in their modality of recruitment. Youth associations sponsored by Fascism, in fact, were not an option, but they were compulsory and boys were recruited thanks to the

so-called *leva fascista*, which recalls the *leva militare*, the mandatory military service. Furthermore, each member had to follow precise rituals, which were imbued with a representation of virile masculinity, supported by the use of rhetorical images and symbols. If the aim of these movements was that of making boys into men, manliness was obviously inspired by Mussolini and the cult of the *Duce* gave rise to a unique manifestation of masculinity, that of the *uomo nuovo fascista*.

Sport, in the form of both gymnastics and competitions, was an essential part of youth education under the regime: although sport exercises acquired relevance in youth education at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when, as George Mosse suggests, 'the identity of body and soul' became 'part of the construction of modern masculinity',²⁶ it was during the regime that attention and care for the masculine body reached its peak. The construction of a new fascist man was, thus, the crucible of various theories, such as Nietzschean nationalism, Italian futurism, and the Greek cult of the male nude body. According to Mosse, 'physical exercise was not regarded as just a preparation for wars to come; it was supposed to build character. However [...] acquiring physical strength, discipline, and agility, and sculpting the body, were considered useless without strength of will' (Mosse, p. 162). Furthermore, as Francesco Boni highlights, masculinity was always conceived as interchangeable with the concept of nation, because 'il corpo maschile dell'atleta si pone come dispositivo di significazione per il corpo maschile della nazione'.²⁷

As for youth policies adopted by the dictatorial government, Italian Fascism could be seen as a pioneer in developing 'techniques of mass socialization and political identity formation that would subsequently mark the youth policies of other European dictatorships'.²⁸ This attention stemmed from a sense of generational bonding, which united those men who had shared the experience of the war. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat suggests, 'a sense of camaraderie and shared trauma united veterans and separated them from their children, who

²⁶ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 41.

²⁷ Francesco Boni, 'Sport, mascolinità e media', in *Mascolinità all'italiana: Costruzioni, narrazioni, mutamenti*, ed. by Elena Dell'Agnese and Elisabetta Ruspini (Turin: Utet, 2007), pp. 79–102 (p. 82).

²⁸ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 93.

developed group identities around the issue of nonparticipation' (Ben-Ghiat, p. 93). Furthermore, even though the fascist ideal of manliness was constituted by the process of maturation enabled by the war, the education of youth was not only a matter of physicality, but involved the attempt to shape minds. The Fascist youth policies, thus, followed two separate directions: lower-class boys were enrolled in the *fasci giovanili di combattimento*, while middle-class and bourgeois young men entered the GUFs (Gruppi Universitari Fascisti), highlighting the importance of young intellectuals in the process of growth, especially with regard to the future leaders of society.

While Fascism seemed to rule young men following military and nationalistic patterns, the process of nationalisation of women was not equally linear. Even though not directly relevant to my discourse on young men's identity, a brief discussion of the role of women during fascism will also help situate men's role within the Fascist society. Torn between the legacy of liberal state institutions, the interference of Catholicism and the desire to create a *nuova italiana*, the regime had to balance state interventions within both women's private and public lives. According to Victoria De Grazia,

the dictatorship only added confusion to the confusion by making incompatible claims on young women, who were supposed to be at once responsive citizens and subordinate family members, both involved in the public life of the New Italy and submissive to paternal authority.²⁹

During the Great War, women played a role of undeniable importance within society, crossing the line between private and public, and acting as protagonists in many sectors, such as industry and bureaucracy; as a result, they developed an awareness of what being a citizen was like, claiming those rights – equality, right to vote, recognition in the public sphere – which, until then, were the exclusive domain of men. However, the advent of Fascism in Italy disappointed women's expectations: the regime, considering

as axiomatic that women and men were different by nature [...] politicized this difference to the advantage of males and made it the cornerstone of an especially repressive, comprehensive new system for defining female citizenship, for governing women's sexuality, wage labor, and social participation. (De Grazia, p. 7)

²⁹ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 117.

Nevertheless, the fascist authoritarianism did not lead to a total denial of a social role for women; on the contrary, female participation in the state's activities was part of the dictatorship's agenda, underscoring a clear attempt to blur some of the distinctions between private and public. In other words, what fascism did was to institutionalise a space for women within society, requesting, in exchange, their renunciation of any gender claims and the construction of a public *persona* at the expense of a female *persona*. According to De Grazia, fascism 'devised new kinds of organizations to satisfy the desire for social engagement, while repressing the female solidarities, individualist values, and political freedoms once promoted by feminist associations' (De Grazia, p. 9); like boyhood, girlhood underwent a precise segmentation, 'reinforced not only by social and cultural conventions' – school, for instance – but 'by political conventions as well' (De Grazia, pp. 118–119).³⁰

Politics of gender drew different reactions, depending on whether they referred to masculinity or femininity: whereas a conscious awareness of their virility was required of young fascist men as proof of their nationalist feelings, women, on the contrary, were forced to negotiate their gender and individual identity as part of the social system. For instance, women's access to youth movements – especially those requiring an intellectual participation – was always associated with sex biases: their political identity seemed to be incompatible with their gender identity. Together with the state's organisation of young men's and women's social roles, women were further subjected to a patriarchal familial framework: according to the symbolical imagery used by Fascism to convey patriarchal and nationalist values, 'the female body was imagined as the main instrument for achieving the fascist dream of a new Italian nation', because, along with the *uomo nuovo*, a *donna nuova* was theorised with the purpose of 'celebrating maternity, reproduction, and the sanctity of the family space'.³¹ As Karen Pinkus puts it, 'the "true" body of the fascist is the phallic body, existing in a state of preparedness for war. [...] Men, however, maintain only one position, and their form is absolutely fixed. In short, male

³⁰ Youth fascist movements for girls were *piccole* and *giovani italiane*, *giovani fasciste* and *fasci femminili*.

³¹ Miguel Andrés Malagrecá, *Queer Italy: Contexts, Antecedents and Representation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 54–55.

identity is legislated; female identity is subject to change.³² The standardisation of the public discourse on women brought about by Fascism did not take into account class, age, and geographical distinctions, which obviously occupied a pre-eminent place in defining women's identities: De Grazia underlines how 'the very effort on the part of the dictatorship to nationalize its female subjects eventually caused the proliferation of alternative identities'.³³ However, as the fascist ideal of nationalisation acted through a process of collectivisation of experience, I would suggest that while these alternative identities 'associated with Catholic, youth, and left-wing oppositional cultures' (De Grazia, p. 13) proliferated, the recognition of a female identity was repressed.

Narrating the Coming of Age in the Aftermath of the First and Second World Wars

In the Introduction to this work, I discussed a few studies that have had the merit of placing the analysis of the *Bildungsroman* in an Italian context – a perspective that, for instance, has been neglected in Moretti's pivotal work on the genre.³⁴ Furthermore, by taking into account works written and/or published after the First World War, these studies oppose Moretti's idea of the end of the genre due to the dramatic consequences of the global conflict. In this section, I will rely on the already quoted essay by Martignoni on the *romanzo di formazione nel Novecento italiano* and on my previous research on the Italian *Bildungsroman* in the aftermath of the Second World War: the former will provide a useful framework of reference and the latter – by focusing on specific case studies – will highlight elements of change in the genre which will show a certain continuity with the novels analysed in this work.

Among the repressive and controlling attitudes of the Fascist regime towards Italian cultural and literary production, the periodical *Solaria* was, despite threat of censorship, a fruitful space for literary experimentation. From the perspective of the coming of age narrative, a strong relationship with the

³² Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising under Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 86–87.

³³ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, p. 13.

³⁴ See *Il romanzo di formazione*, ed. by Papini, Fioretti, and Spignoli. Also see Summerfield and Downward, *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman*.

French literary scene, what has been called the 'tono Proust',³⁵ and the influence of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* provided the narrative tropes for a re-elaboration of the *Bildungsroman*'s themes and structure. More specifically, Martignoni lists, among the literary models for the Italian writers of that period, André Gide, Cocteau with his *Enfants Terribles* (1929), Larbaud (*Fermina Márquez*, 1911 and *Enfantines*, 1918), *Les Grand-Meaulnes* by Alain-Fournier (1913), and *Diabolo au corps* by Radiguet (1923). As Martignoni argues,

Solariani e affini prelevano da quest'area eversiva e tempestosa i miti dell'adolescenza ribelle, gli sconvolgimenti dell'eros anche omosessuale (Gide, Cocteau, Larbaud), le esperienze di scuola, collegio, convitto, tra sodalizi e conflittualità. (Martignoni, p. 80)

Elio Vittorini's *Il garofano rosso* (1933–1936), whose episodes started to be published in *Solaria* until its censorship, might be considered as part of this literary trend which engages with the coming of age narrative in the twentieth century. The novel narrates the coming of age process of the adolescent Alessio Mainardi through his relationship with friends, the political environment, and romantic relationships. Despite the analogies with the structure of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, in the novel there is a strong generational component which makes the protagonist's transition from youth to adulthood a model for his generation. Furthermore, the novel anticipates those narrative themes that will become central in the coming of age novels produced in the second half of the twentieth century: the peer group begins to take over the formative role of the family and the social institutions, such as school. This will become central in some of the coming of age novels that have been produced in the aftermath of the Second World War. In this section, I will draw a parallel between a representative group of novels published after World War II and the case studies I am analysing in this work in order to discuss the way in which the literary genre has evolved over the decades and to highlight differences and shared aspects.

In previous research on the *Bildungsroman* in twentieth-century Italy, I focused on a group of novels published between the aftermath of the Second World War and the 1980s by four Italian writers: Moravia (*Agostino*, 1944 and

³⁵ This definition was created by Debenedetti in the essay *Proust 1925*. See Martignoni, *Per il romanzo di formazione nel Novecento italiano*, p. 79.

La disubbidienza, 1948), Soldati (*La confessione*, 1955), Saba (*Ernesto*, 1975), and Volponi (*Il lanciatore di giavellotto*, 1981). This study, which focused on the analysis of the male protagonist of the novels, aimed to demonstrate that, in its Italian evolution, the coming of age pattern is intrinsically linked to the acquisition of a (male) gender identity and that this acquisition of identity is also dependent on the relationship that the young protagonist establishes with the 'other', namely his family and friends. Furthermore, my previous research shows that the growing up process was characterised by a fundamental rite of passage that draws a clear line between childhood and a more mature identity: the sexual initiation. It is important to underline here that the protagonists of the group of novels studied in my previous research were in that liminal phase of life between childhood and adolescence: their 'coming of age' was more a transition from childhood to youth than an entry into adult society. This narrative 'regression' of the protagonist, who, in the traditional literary genre, was on the verge of adulthood, is one of the signs that, as I have already pointed out, Moretti identifies as symbolising the end of the *Bildungsroman*.³⁶ In fact, the centrality of adolescent characters in the examples of the genre in the first half of the twentieth century – not only in the Italian context – testifies to an increasing interest in childhood and adolescence as those phases of life in which the basis for adulthood is formed and is also symbolic of the importance that adolescence assumed in contemporary society, as argued in this chapter when discussing Gillis' work. As we will see in the following chapters in the examples of the genre from the 1980s selected for this study, there is a renewed interest in narrating the transition from youth to adulthood, focusing, therefore, much more on older protagonists. Despite this difference, in the corpus of texts I analysed in my previous research, there are some narrative elements which I will also identify in the works by Tondelli, Veronesi, and Culicchia and that, I will argue, could be considered as fundamental in the re-elaboration of the genre in Italian twentieth-century literature.³⁷ First and foremost, in the novels by Moravia, Soldati, Saba, and Volponi the role of the family in the process of the protagonist's coming of age begins to falter to leave

³⁶ See Moretti, *The Way of the World*, pp. 231–32.

³⁷ This discussion does not aim to be exhaustive, but to provide a general framework of reference in which it is possible to situate the evolution of the *Bildungsroman* in the twentieth century in Italy. For a detailed study of the genre from the aftermath of the Second World War to the 1980s, see Masenga, 'Uomini si diventa'.

room for the peer group. Working as a metaphor for a more general critique of the Italian bourgeois society of that time, the young man is unable to find positive role models in his family and often turns to his closest friends for advice and support in his process of maturation. Furthermore, father figures are often invisible in the narrative, therefore forcing the boy to seek an alternative male role model outside the family. Finally, sexual initiation (or its attempt) becomes a central stage of the adolescent protagonist's development and is often prompted by the uncanny relationship between the adolescent and his mother, which urges the protagonist to experience his first sexual relationship with a prostitute or in a homosexual relationship.³⁸

The examples of the genre in contemporary Italy that I selected for this study show an awareness of the traditional *Bildungsroman* and its evolution: as the narrative analysis in Chapters Three and Four will demonstrate, the relationship with the 'other' keeps its centrality in the process of coming of age of the male protagonist and develops around the same social groups, such as the family and the peer group. In these texts, parental figures are totally absent, as in Tondelli's *Altri libertini*, or, when present, play an oppressive role in the protagonist's life (the mother in Culicchia's *Ameni inganni* and the fathers in Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati* and Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra*); are unable to understand his life choices (Leo's parents in Tondelli's *Camere separate*); or provide negative role models (in Culicchia's *Brucia la città*). The peer group, as we will see, therefore becomes a safe 'port of call' for these young men; however, if in the novels of the first half of the century the group of peers had the duty to prepare the boy for his youth and, consequently, his final entry into adult society, in these texts it seems to replace adulthood, to provide a viable solution to the protagonist's refusal to take up adult responsibilities and delay his coming of age.

Sexuality, as in the previous group of novels, remains a pivotal parameter which defines the protagonist's gender identity. Even though not as pre-eminent as in *Ernesto*, *Il lanciatore di giavellotto*, and *Agostino*, the shift from the mother to the prostitute is reworked in Culicchia's *Ameni inganni*, where the protagonist negotiates his identity in a complex relationship with women through pornography. The theme of sexual initiation is also present in Culicchia's *Tutti*

³⁸ Sexual initiation with a prostitute is a common trope in the coming of age novel and, for instance, is present in the quoted novel by Vittorini.

giù per terra, while *Brucia la città* and *Gli sfiorati* deal with a more general subjectification of female individualities in the sexual and romantic relationship.³⁹ Finally, in Saba's *Ernesto* and Soldati's *La confessione* homosexuality is represented as the first step in the boys' negotiation of their sexuality and gender identity and does not imply, as will be the case in Tondelli's works analysed here, the construction of a mature homosexual identity.

The approach I am pursuing in my research is twofold: a literary investigation, focused on the *Bildungsroman* and its legacy which affects contemporary Italian literature, and a parallel overview of the cultural context, with the purpose of emphasising the historical background and a range of issues pertaining to the study of male gender acquisition in younger Italian generations. Specifically, I have therefore discussed the creation of adolescence as a further segmentation of youth at the beginning of the twentieth century, which has overturned the dynamics between young people and adults. Furthermore, the role of war and military service in shaping gender and self-consciousness, and the representation of masculinity as conveyed by Fascism, the most influential political power in twentieth-century Italy to include the role of imagery as a huge part of its politics, have also been discussed as fundamental steps in the historical development of young men's identification. As for the *Bildungsroman*, I have shown that it is possible to identify examples of the genre in the novels published in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the coming of age process focused on the transition from adolescence to youth and became a period of negotiation of identity which involved the relationship with familial figures and the peer group and the sexual initiation as a fundamental step of becoming men.

In the second chapter, I will provide the background for my narrative analysis in Chapters Three and Four by focusing on a subsequent historical period, starting from the aftermath of World War II to include the years which are more pertinent to my research: the thirty-year period of Italian social, political, and cultural evolution between 1980 and 2011. My attention will be focused on the role of institutions in youth's lives, in particular family and the

³⁹ I will show in my analysis how women's identities and desires are, in these texts, rarely taken into account by the male protagonists.

work environment; patterns of consumption; and cultural activities and their enjoyment by the young, with the purpose of demonstrating that the *Bildungsroman* in the twentieth century not only did not come to an end, but was also reinforced by a new powerful representation of youth. If, as I suggested, coming of age novels 'expand the depiction of personal development to include historical change',⁴⁰ I would argue that the process of coming of age in the twentieth century follows new social patterns which, as a consequence, affect its literary representation.

⁴⁰ Kontjie, *The German Bildungsroman*, p. 40.

Chapter Two

Defining the ‘Delaying of Age’: Growing Up in Contemporary Italy

In Chapter One, I discussed the development of the *Bildungsroman* over the decades, charting the changes undergone by the literary genre from its first examples at the end of the eighteenth century to the two World Wars. Opposing the idea of a ‘death’ of the coming of age novel, as argued by Moretti, I underlined the ceaseless vitality of the genre in contemporary narrative, noticing, however, how its structure has been deeply affected by changes within society and, more specifically, in young people’s lives. Furthermore, I narrowed the focus of my research, choosing to deal with young masculinities: despite the increasing attention towards the coming of age of female subjectivities, I believe that in contemporary Italian literature the *Bildungsroman* is still mainly a male-dominated genre.¹ Working against the background of Moretti’s critical appraisal of the genre, I then provided evidence of the increasing relevance attributed to youth – especially, young men – during World War I and in the aftermath of the war. The aim of this historical-sociological section was to highlight changes in the relationship between young people and society in terms of transition to adulthood and acceptance of adult responsibilities.

The purpose of Chapter Two is to provide a framework of reference for the analysis of the case studies I will develop in Chapters Three and Four: by focusing on a more recent historical period (1950s to the present), I propose to give an account of social trends and changes in this period, creating a background against which I will structure the narrative study. I will therefore examine the social and cultural milieu while making reference to the literary genre and the narrative texts selected for this work. More specifically, I aim to provide a definition of key terms and to contextualise them in a precise historical period so as to give evidence of the existence of what I have termed ‘delaying of age’ as a specific national (Italian) and contemporary (1980–2011) development of the coming of age narrative. By focusing on four main issues, I will attempt to demonstrate that to come of age in Italy for young men has been

¹ By male-dominated genre, I mean to underline the prevalence of male authors engaging with the coming of age novel and their focus on narratives of male development.

an increasingly challenging task in recent years; since the 'invention' of adolescence (as argued by Gillis in Chapter One), youth has been put in the spotlight, its habits and behaviours scrutinised by sociological, historical, and cultural works. By taking their place within society, I suggest that younger generations have been increasingly independent from adult society and, therefore, have given rise to what can be defined as a youth culture, a place in which to socialise as young men and women. Examining the key moments of young men's lives – their rites of passage in their transition towards adulthood – I will unravel the process of coming of age in contemporary Italy, defining it as a 'delaying of age', a postponement of adulthood (and a retreat into youth) as a reaction to an increasingly unstable and unwelcoming adult society. This refusal, I argue, has to be considered as caused by, or relating to, four key steps/moments in the process of becoming a man: the acquisition of a generational and gender identity, family relations, the work environment, and consumption patterns. Even though these generic 'categories' will often overlap in my discussion, this chapter will be structured around those keywords which are central to my methodological and theoretical approach.

Is There Such a Thing as Generational Identity?

To experience a generational identity means to belong to a certain group of people, to share a precise common ground, and to identify oneself as part of a series of social and historical experiences. In this sense, the two World Wars and the Fascist years provided Italian young men with the means to develop, for the first time, a generational sense of belonging, a shared experience which contributed to defining their identity. As I suggested in Chapter One, male camaraderie was the cornerstone of generational relationships during the two world conflicts: manliness and virility were exalted as the quality of a generation whose process of coming of age was often deemed to be incomplete, put at risk by war's casualties. Furthermore, social changes also affected relationships between generations, which can be roughly divided into the generation of mothers and fathers, and the generation of daughters and sons, which is to say between those who came of age during the First World War and between the two wars and those who grew up during and after World War II without actively participating in the hostilities. By using the term generation, I will differentiate

between what was defined 'generazioni storiche',² which often but not always overlaps with 'generazioni naturali':³ historical generations are self-defining, since they include people who feel they are partaking in the same influential event – the expression was, in fact, used with reference to the two World Wars; on the contrary, demographic generations only take into account the biographical data. In the Italian social context after the Second World War, I would argue, the two generations facing one another were part of two separate demographic clusters. However, belonging to a generation, for them, was also a matter of identifying themselves as members or non-members of a historical generation, depending on whether or not they took part in the war.

The discussion of generational identity is important in my work because it lies at the core of the analysis I will develop in Chapter Three, where I will look at the identification within the male peer group and, more generally, at the influence of generational belonging on young male identity. The difference between *generazioni storiche* and *generazioni naturali* outlined above is indeed central to my analysis, because it highlights two ways of conceiving the generation and, by extension, the idea of generational identity. When referring to the generational group, then, I will not rely exclusively on the biographical data (same age group), but I will refer to a shared participation in the social and cultural milieu – the sharing of behaviours and beliefs among the members of the generational group.

The concept of '*generation as actuality*', as elaborated by Karl Mannheim, refers to those individuals who are 'united as an actual generation in so far as they participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period, and in so far as they have an active or passive experience of the interactions of forces which made up the new situation'. Besides, a further segmentation is possible within the same generational group, where individuals who '*work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units*'.⁴ If the historical component assumed a rather important position in Mannheim's approach to the generation problem, a different perspective is offered by Philip Abrams in his *Historical*

² Patrizia Dogliani, *Storia dei giovani* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003), p. 9.

³ Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: Saggio storico sulla moralità della Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991), p. 351.

⁴ Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generation', in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. by Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1953), pp. 276–322 (p. 304).

Sociology.⁵ Abrams's study aims to avoid any schism between individual and society, arguing that these are not two separate entities, but, on the contrary, they merge in the generational group itself. 'Generation', therefore, is immediately connected to 'identity', inasmuch as both are protagonists in the process of development of the self. In this regard, Abrams quotes Erik Erikson and his work on the identity formation of youth, best represented in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968).⁶ To Erikson, identity is 'the self-consciousness at successive moments in the individual's life history of the participation of that life-history in a social history, and vice-versa'.⁷ The combination of identity and generation is what Abrams calls 'sociological generation', meaning a 'span of time within which identity is assembled on the basis of an unchanged system of meanings and possibilities' (Abrams, p. 256). However, with the analysis of the novels, I will demonstrate that belonging to a generation means to share experience and share the values of the peer group, which change according to change in society. To summarise, therefore, 'generation' could be considered, as suggested by Carmen Leccardi in relation to a study of generations of women in southern Italy, as a 'costrutto sociale dinamico che lega l'azione individuale al tempo della storia e della società'.⁸ The idea of youth and generation, furthermore, are inextricably linked, so that it can be difficult to think of the former without implying the latter. As argued by Alberto De Bernardi, group and generational identity work as a substitute for individual identity in youth. During the process of coming of age, young men and women act as bound by a collective force and the generation comes to represent the only way to express one's individuality:

l'attore storico giovanile entra in scena solo all'interno di un aggregato più ampio nel quale soggetti nati nella stessa coorte di anni agiscono contemporaneamente, riconoscendosi nella stessa tavola di valori, o in diverse e spesso contrapposte tavole di valori, percependo se stessi e

⁵ Philip Abrams, 'The Historical Sociology of Individuals: Identity and the Problem of Generations', in *Historical Sociology*, ed. by Philip Abrams (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 227–66.

⁶ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971).

⁷ Erik H. Erikson, quoted in Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 252.

⁸ Carmen Leccardi, 'Generazioni e genealogie femminili nel Mezzogiorno', in *Tra i generi: Rileggendo le differenze di genere, di generazione, di orientamento sessuale*, ed. by Carmen Leccardi (Milan: Guerini, 2002), pp. 47–69 (p. 48).

autorappresentandosi come parte di un tutto, che assume i contorni dell'effettivo soggetto storico. Questo aggregato è appunto la generazione.⁹

A keyword in the quotation above is the concept of self-representation as a fundamental stage in the process of identification. By establishing the interdependence of social and individual action in the process of acquisition of the self, I assume identity to be the product of social constructions and social aggregations ('costrutto sociale dinamico'). Stuart Hall defines identities as 'constructed through, not outside, difference', inasmuch as 'it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the "positive" meaning of any term – and thus its "identity" – can be constructed'.¹⁰ Identification, in this sense, is 'a process never completed – always "in process"' and 'identities are about questions of using the resources of *history, language and culture in the process of becoming* rather than being' (Hall, pp. 2–4, emphasis added). This definition powerfully highlights three fundamental components of the process of 'becoming self' – history, language, and culture –, elements that play the role of counterparts for the subject, and, at the same time, are embedded in the discourse on identity. Speaking of generational identity means looking at the individual as a member of his/her social community, and it is in this very integration within the generational group that problems of identity develop. Hence, the process of identity negotiation takes place when there is uncertainty about one's belonging to a specific social group: often individuals are labelled according to the values, interests, and points of view they share with others and stating one's identity becomes thus a matter of, as Bauman puts it, placing 'oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns', making sure that 'people around would accept this placement as right and proper'.¹¹ Mutual recognition ratifies one's identity precisely because it enables a complex process of identification, that of the individual who sees him/herself as such only when located in a broader social context.

⁹ Alberto De Bernardi, 'Il mito della gioventù e i miti dei giovani', in *Il secolo dei giovani: Le nuove generazioni e la storia del Novecento*, ed. by Paolo Sorcinelli and Angelo Varni (Rome: Donzelli, 2004), pp. 55–79 (p. 58).

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, 'Who Needs "Identity"?', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 1–17 (pp. 4–5).

¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist - or a Short History of Identity', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 18–36 (p. 19).

Identity and generation are, in my analysis of coming of age narratives in contemporary Italy, a pivotal point of view from which to observe young people's processes of growing up. In this sense, I stress the importance of the idea of youth and generation as inextricably linked, focusing more specifically on the idea of generation as the only social locus in which young men and women seem to be able to represent themselves and their identities. If in the traditional *Bildungsroman* the entry into adult society as one of its members was, for the young man, the definitive evidence of a complete process of coming of age, in contemporary Italy adulthood is no longer the aim and identification moves to the generational context and within the peer group. In terms of male coming of age and male bonding as one of their most important components, the two World Wars and the Fascist regime offered young men a unique opportunity to relate within a group, making male camaraderie a fundamental stage of their growing up experience. The aftermath of the Second World War presented young people with new difficulties in terms of coming of age due to the radical changes society was undergoing.

Looking for (Male) Models in the Aftermath of the War

After the Second World War, Europe underwent a period of intense economic growth, which led to the reconstruction or, more often, to the replacement of previous war-torn structures of power: social, cultural, political, and economic development contributed to shaping a new physiognomy of the European context, leading people to rethink relational and consumption patterns. Even though this reorganisation was a constant element in Western countries' policies during the immediate post-war period in Europe, Italy should be considered a special case inasmuch as its participation in the widespread process of renewal was, to a certain extent, different. The diversity of the Italian condition has to be identified in two of the main issues, which concern European reconstruction plans: the process of economic growth and a more general problem of representation, which, I would suggest, are strictly entwined. One of the first resolutions taken by European governments in 1945 was that of supporting a profound industrial reorganisation: however, in Italy this process took place later than in other European countries. As Jan Kurz and Marica Tolomelli put it, 'the radical structural transformation of the nation, following

which Italy would enter into the rankings of the most highly industrialized nations in the world, took place almost entirely during the five-year period between 1958 and 1963'.¹² The rapidity of the so-called 'economic miracle' thus greatly affected Italian society, causing perceivable changes in social and familial structures and led, therefore, to the dismantlement of previous relational patterns between genders and generations. However, it should be highlighted that while the restructuring of the Italian economy took place mostly during this five-year period, the process of reconfiguring social relationships – and individual identities' representation within society – was slower, and, as I will show later on, started from the very end of World War II, gradually developing through the fifties until the present.

Furthermore, the experience of the war had several implications for the dynamics between genders; during the hostilities, women had the chance to enter the social scene as protagonists and to achieve a public space, yet in the war's aftermath a tendency to re-confine women within domestic spaces and to allow men to regain possession of public life was in play. If we argue that the Italian case differed from the European way of reconfiguring social structures of power, then this difference lay behind the twofold legacy that Italian post-1945 generations had to handle: the Second World War and the Fascist regime. As Danielle Hipkins has underlined in her study on gender representation in Italian post-war cinema, '[t]he impact of the two factors on gender relations is difficult to disentangle, insistent as Fascist rhetoric was on a militaristic notion of masculinity and a home-building notion of femininity'.¹³ I have already discussed in Chapter One the powerful set of images that Fascism deployed in order to keep Italian masculinity and femininity under control, but what is worth noting in relation to the Second World War in Italy is the widespread sense of inadequacy experienced by men at war and the increasing ability acquired by women to manage their own lives: '[i]f men found themselves unable to perform the aggrandised conquering military hero that Fascism had promised them, women, frequently left in charge of households and sometimes involved in the

¹² Jan Kurz and Marica Tolomelli, 'Italy', in *Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1965–1977*, ed. by Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), pp. 83–96 (p. 83).

¹³ Danielle Hipkins, 'Were Sisters Doing It for Themselves?: Prostitutes, Brothels and Discredited Masculinity in Postwar Italian Cinema', in *War-Torn Tales: Representing Gender and World War II in Literature and Film*, ed. by Danielle Hipkins and Gill Plain (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 81–103 (p. 82).

resistance, found their Fascist designation as home-makers as equally inappropriate' (Hipkins, p. 82). Therefore, in the aftermath of the war, previous traditional structures of family were at stake, causing difficulty for both women and men in adhering to feminine and masculine models offered by Fascism, but also in returning to those social roles which belonged to society before the war; from a problem of identification, this failed correspondence between gender roles and gender expectations turned out to be an issue of representation as well.

As I have already stated, in the aftermath of the Second World War people found it difficult to identify themselves as individuals and as members of a generation within disrupted social frameworks and as a consequence, the representation of such a changing society was a problematic issue. Much of the work on the representation of the post-war period in Europe has been made by scholars in film studies: even though this academic discipline seems to diverge from the purposes of my study, I would suggest that it gives a sharp insight into gender dynamics and relational patterns, offering useful tools of analysis. Focusing on both representation and reception, in fact, this research has made visible the bond between the negotiation of a precise historical period with all its difficulties and implications – namely, the traumatic legacy of the war and its reflection on social and familial structures – and the effective reception of the representation made by cinematic readings, which delineate models and patterns to follow. Furthermore, as David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle have stated in their survey of Italian mass culture from Fascism to the Cold War, cinema 'played an important role in the emotional and sexual development of adolescents',¹⁴ because it introduced them to new adult behaviours and disrupted previous educational beliefs on sexual issues, triggering new forms of desire and individuality. Leisure activities such as cinema and dancing, attributing to the 'display of young bodies as entertainment' (Forgacs and Gundle, p. 69) a place within social routine, were decisive in making sense of the changes occurring to young women and men. Given the predominant role played by films in providing young Italians models for the negotiation of a mature self, and in tune with my work on the construction of young masculine identities, I will linger over a few studies which, in my opinion, offer an accurate

¹⁴ David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, eds., *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 67.

picture of what being a young man in Italy in the aftermath of World War II was like.

In the introduction to the already quoted collection of essays *War-Torn Tales*, the editors focused on ‘war remembered and retold, [...] what can and cannot be articulated at different times and in different contexts, the negotiation and acknowledgment of guilt, the processes of mourning and griefwork, and the gradual emergence of counter-cultural responses’,¹⁵ therefore making clear that the pervasive trauma stemming from the experience of the war characterises a wide range of situations and can be detected in social and cultural experiences over an extended span of time. The disarticulation of gender dynamics in the war’s aftermath was epitomised by the ideal of ‘the restoration of normative, patriarchal gender relations’ (Hipkins and Plain, pp. 15–16): if for women, as I have already highlighted, the reapplication of past social norms consisted in a renewed inclusion within the familial domain, men had to deal with a ‘transition from the homosocial to the heterosexual, from the group to the couple’ (Hipkins and Plain, p. 15), and, by extension, from fellowship to sexual relationships and family. Whereas I utterly agree on seeing the restoration of patriarchy as strictly entangled with the re-establishment of the value of family and couple, I would make a further distinction: the generation directly involved in this transition from homosociality to heterosexuality is that historical generation of people who can identify themselves as actively participating in the war, namely the veterans. However, if I shift the focus on to the generation of boys (and girls) who came of age after World War II, whose social aim was not yet (or no longer) that of starting a family, then I would argue that homosociality remains a pivotal value, becoming a powerful instrument of reconfiguration – and construction – of identity.¹⁶ Young women and men who belonged to this ‘natural generation’, thus, socialised within their peer group, finding in the ceaseless confrontation/cooperation with the ‘other’ a means of negotiating identity. I suggest that it is during the Second World War’s aftermath that I could identify the first attempt to organise identity around collective representations that are not militaristic – an issue that became prevalent during student movements in

¹⁵ Danielle Hipkins and Gill Plain, ‘Introduction: Telling Tales’, in *War-Torn Tales: Representing Gender and World War II in Literature and Film*, ed. by Danielle Hipkins and Gill Plain (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 9–22 (p. 12).

¹⁶ It must be underlined, however, that homosocial relations during the war were mainly constructed in that precise historical moment, while homosociality and male (and female) friendship among individuals of subsequent generations were founded on a different basis.

1968 and the second wave feminist movement and that has retained its centrality in contemporary Italian society, characterising some of the novels I am studying in this work.¹⁷

Yet, what did it mean to be a young man in Italy in the 1950s? What did youngsters in search of a masculine identity worry about? In her study of 'pink neorealism', Mary Wood argues that Italian cinema between 1946 and 1955 deployed 'a range of Italian identities' that were perceived by the audience as models to follow in order to 'construct an imaginary, but new, national self'. Underlining the interdependence of individual and national identity, the author highlights the role of popular cinema in complying with 'desires for change in social and sexual mores' that were expressed by a younger generation seeking a place of its own within society.¹⁸ Referring to Pierre Bourdieu, Wood states that Italian films released in the aftermath of World War II contributed to creating a *habitus*. In Wood's words,

[p]rofound economic and social changes in Italian society at this time meant that gender hierarchies and models of masculine behaviour had to be renegotiated because they were less easy to reconcile with modernisation, associated with US capitalist and cultural models. At the same time, and this is a worldwide phenomenon, a new generation of young men and a new class are making their bid for cultural power [...]. Performances of masculinity in pink neorealist films reveal an increasing use of new competences, such as how to function as a successful male away from the traditional family unit, how to be successful emotionally with women in new economic and social conditions, how to use popular culture to bond with other people in your *habitus*, how to be a consumer, how to get by in society and put yourself at the best advantage. (Wood, p. 143)

Whereas patriarchy was perceived by the generation of mothers and fathers as still being a valid social paradigm, the Italian youth in the 1950s was often accused of deliberately inverting power and gender roles, aiming to recreate in their own everyday life those models which came from abroad, in particular from the US. Therefore, American film, through the display of fictional and real male (and female) models, offered a plethora of reference figures that

¹⁷ Chapter Three will deal with the negotiation of gender (male) identity in a generational context: the novels I will take into account were written across the thirty-year period which delimits my research, but are representative of three decades: the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, which are depicted in Tondelli's *Altri libertini*, the late 1980s in Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati*, and the first years of the new millennium, which lies in the background of Culicchia's *Brucia la città*.

¹⁸ Mary Wood, "Pink Neorealism" and the Rehearsal of Gender Roles 1946–66', in *The Trouble with Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Phil Powrie, Ann Davies, and Bruce Babington (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), pp. 134–43 (pp. 134–35).

became objects of emotional investment for Italian boys (and girls), while Italian films were seen as a means of interpreting this foreign reality, as a kind of domestication of an unknown and yet to be discovered representation of youth within the national context. In this regard, the rise of youth power was often considered subversive by public opinion, leading in some cases, as Enrica Capussotti argues, to the use of the label '*gioventù perduta*' to depict young groups' behaviour inspired by American movies:

il legame tra questi generi e i più giovani giustificava il timore di una sovversione delle fondamenta stesse dell'organizzazione sociale poiché avrebbe irresponsabilmente stimolato la violenza maschile e la sessualità femminile. Queste due tematiche ricorrono durante il decennio accompagnate da una potenziale dinamica rovesciata: l'inversione dei generi e dei ruoli sessuali come specchio della sovversione dell'ordine familiare', luogo di subordinazione giovanile e femminile in una cultura ancora profondamente patriarcale.¹⁹

Capussotti's research provides us with a thoughtful study of the bond which links Italian and American culture from the aftermath of the Second World War. In the next section I will focus, more specifically, on the strategies adopted by Italian youth in dealing with the post-war legacy and the 'economic boom'.

The Generational Group and Collective Identity in 1968

I have already suggested that the process of industrialisation undertaken by Italy between the 1950s and the 1960s was the catalyst for a complex rethinking of social frameworks, involving geographical and cultural transmigrations (from the south to the north of the peninsula), the consolidation of a mass proletariat, the acquisition of new patterns of behaviour and consumption, and the lack of points of reference within the familial environment. As Kurz and Tolomelli have pointed out, this period of cultural and social upheavals caused 'an increase in the generation gap', clearly separating

young people – who had grown up on the crest of the wave of affluence, with prospects of social mobility and access to an ever-increasing range of public and private consumption – and adults, who had grown up amidst Fascism, war, resistance, and reconstruction'.²⁰

¹⁹ Enrica Capussotti, *Gioventù perduta: Gli anni Cinquanta dei giovani e del cinema in Italia* (Florence: Giunti, 2004), pp. 54–55.

²⁰ Kurz and Tolomelli, *Italy*, p. 84.

All these social changes and developments were set in motion during the fifties, but improved and differentiated during subsequent decades, reaching their apex with the 1968 student protest and the second wave feminist movement, as I will show in the next section. The 1970s in Italy can be remembered for their centrality in redefining hierarchical relations, both along gender and generational lines, leading to a change within society as a whole. The consequences of the 1968 movement and second wave feminism on Italian patriarchal society are strictly intertwined, both in terms of participation – women were an active part of the student movement and young people were indeed present in the frontline of feminist protests – and their effects in shaping new social roles. First of all, it is worth specifying that ‘1968’ will stand in this discussion as a metaphor used to refer to a broader historical period – ‘the turbulent events of the 1960s and 1970s’ – which, as Klimke and Scharloth point out in *1968 in Europe*, is now part of ‘the continent’s cultural memory’, and it has been narrated both as the cause ‘for the disintegration of traditional family structures – an atomization of society or even terrorism’ and the epitome of ‘a greater liberalization and democratization of society and for the enlargement of individual freedoms’.²¹

There are two factors arising from the political climate of those years which I highlight as deserving more attention for the purposes of my research: the increasing awareness of a collective sense of belonging within the young community and the radical transformation of relations among individuals and between feminine and masculine roles. Other than an age of political instability, the 1970s in Italy were also fertile ground for changes affecting two new elements of social interest, with major consequences: gender and generation. In the words of Guido Viale, an exponent of the 1968 movement, one of the founders and a national leader of *Lotta continua*, at that time a university student in Turin,

there was undoubtedly a liberalization and modernization of customs, of interpersonal relations... between the sexes... between parents and children, of the family structure that was radical and irreversible, in spite of all attempts at restoration carried out with particular virulence afterwards and even today.

²¹ Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, ‘1968 in Europe: An Introduction’, in *Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1965–1977*, ed. by Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), pp. 1–9 (p. 7).

[...] From a point of view of learning; something that we can still strive for, but which has hardly reached today's younger generation, is a life experience and a collective practice founded on a daily invention of the way we interact with others, our peers and the rest of society.²²

The peer group, thus, became the symbol of the revolution, ratifying an intra-generational alliance between people sharing the same values, which caused a break between the young community and adult figures. This sense of division between historical generations contributed to creating a mythical aura surrounding the events of 1968 which, I would suggest, prevented subsequent generations of the eighties and the nineties from partaking in the collective agency experienced by their predecessors, especially in terms of political commitment. Whereas for young protesters of the seventies individual and group claims overlapped, young men and women in postmodern society seem to be unable to bind themselves together in order to realise a broader social aim.²³

The importance of the group of peers for the coming of age of young people from the 1970s onwards has to be considered as dependent on the loosening of authoritarian forms of power both within society and the family. More specifically, the rejection of authoritarian figures in the familial context which began with the 1968 movement led to the disempowerment of adults and the consequent empowerment of peers and the generational group as the *locus* of identification. The so-called death of the father taking place in 1970s Italian society was twofold: from a political perspective, it caused the disappearance – on the left – of the ‘father party’, while – on the right – it made space for the appearance of ‘new surrogate paternal figures’.²⁴ From a familial perspective, it introduced changes, especially in women’s responsibilities and roles; however, despite the weakening of adult figures, the family structure remained, during the 1970s, a powerful element of socialisation. I will focus on the family as another important keyword for this work in the following section: what I deem important to be underlined at this point is that, despite the ongoing centrality of the family within society, the younger generation no longer sees it as the aim of their

²² Guido Viale, interviewed by Fabio Pelini in Rome on October 30, 2001, in Giovanni Orsina and Gaetano Quagliariello, eds., *La crisi del sistema politico italiano e il Sessantotto* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005), p. 542. Quoted in Kurz and Tolomelli, *Italy*, p. 93.

²³ An example of the differences between the 1968 generation and the following generation in terms of political commitment will be provided with the analysis of Giuseppe Culicchia’s *Tutti giù per terra* in Chapter Four.

²⁴ Cento Bull and Giorgio, *Speaking Out and Silencing*, p. 6.

process of coming of age. The idea of a generational 'delaying of age', then, stems from the shared sense of impossibility and failure which characterised young people's entry into adult society, which, in the 1980s and 1990s, is further strengthened by a widespread crisis of those 'institutions and ideologies which had previously formed identities and fostered social cohesion'.²⁵

Changes in Gender Roles: The Second Wave Feminist Movement

The 1970s was a period of upheaval in Italian society that, as we have seen, made possible a rethinking of traditional social structures both in terms of generational and gender division. If the loss of adults' authoritarianism had empowered young people, the consequent changes in terms of roles and responsibilities also need to be observed from a gender perspective, which takes into account the part played by the second wave feminist movement. The impact of the 1970s on women's role within Italian society certainly had important effects on family politics; however, as I will show in this section, the wave of legislative reforms approved in that period had to face a parallel contradictory symbolic representation within the cultural and social milieu. According to Luisa Passerini, the search for equality and parity which characterised the reforms approved in the 1970s (divorce, abortion, family rights, etc.) was counterbalanced by 'a marked process of *differentiation* or pluralisation in gender relations, towards a greater recognition of difference in the gender system and in sexual identities', manifested by the feminist movement.²⁶

From a legislative point of view, the 1970s welcomed the law in favour of divorce (December 1970), which, despite becoming the object of a fierce campaign for its abolition, was eventually further confirmed by the results of a referendum in May 1974. In May 1978, a law on the protection of maternity and abortion was approved, and then preserved after the referendum set up in 1981. Furthermore, May 1975 saw the approval of the *Riforma del diritto della famiglia*, a law concerning the reform of family rights, soon followed by law 903 on equal

²⁵ Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents: 1980–2001* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 31. Ginsborg quotes '[t]rade unions, mass parties, churches' as those institutions losing power in the 1980s and 1990s.

²⁶ Luisa Passerini, 'Gender Relations', in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. by David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 144–59 (p. 145).

rights at work in December 1977. This brief discussion of legislative reforms taking place in Italy in the 1970s shows how, in this decade, the changes in gender relations – especially within the family – that started in the aftermath of World War II found a corresponding validation in the public domain. The legislation on divorce and family rights, more specifically, demonstrated the popular support for these legal initiatives, which put into practice the desires of many men and women. In the traditional patriarchal Italian society, '[r]eform gave rise to a new vision of family as an association of equals, a community in which parity, not hierarchy, was a rule' (Passerini, p. 147).

The legislative reforms of the 1970s, therefore, at least partly managed to address the deep changes that Italian society had been undergoing since the 1950s. However, Passerini underlines the dialectic between equality and difference in Italian society and which was also at the base of the Italian feminist movement. As Passerini argues,

[t]o achieve equality before the law and equality of rights, it is necessary first of all to abolish major discrepancies between the rights of women and those of men, but it is then also necessary to recognize gender difference and differences between individuals. (Passerini, p. 149)

Despite aspiring to equality without taking into account difference, the 1970s marked an important stage in Italy's changing gender relations. Women's fight against patriarchy, in fact, was accompanied by the acknowledgment of the necessity of a dialogue between the genders: the 1970s movement, in this sense, contributed to bringing together men and women 'in a new spirit of co-operation, accepting and valuing one another's otherness, seeing the Other as the counterpart of the self' (Passerini, p. 150).

The Italian second wave feminist movement had a remarkable influence on gender relations in the public and private sphere. First of all, it was important inasmuch as it started a series of reflections on female subjectivity which had been long overdue in Italian society. The most radical wing of the movement advocated a separation from men, who were seen as separate from the women's cause. Separatism was not widely followed, but the movement was certainly responsible for a change in women's perceptions of their role in society and of the relationship within the collective group, which affected men as well. In this regard, Passerini makes reference to Liliana Ellena's pioneering research

on the relationships between men and women between the 1970s and the 1980s, which brings to the fore a latent incomprehension of men towards women, the lack of a shared 'language' through which to communicate, and a difficult (if not missing) empathy with the women's cause.²⁷

Furthermore, the 1970s was an important decade because it saw the birth of the homosexual movement. Based on similar grounds as the feminist movement – 'the collective-based structure, the emphasis on beginning with the personal, the critique of psychoanalysis, the celebration of the body and sexuality, the critique of the bourgeois family and of formal politics' –²⁸ it often showed, in its beginnings, a tendency to universalism. In other words, the homosexual movement of the 1970s, through its revolutionary front *Fuori*, invoked the presence of a 'universal homosexual desire': a universalism that lost power during the nineties when a celebration of homosexual pride overcame it.²⁹ Like the feminist movement, the homosexual movement had an impact on Italian culture and society, making its voice heard through writing and political intervention. From this perspective, Tondelli's *Altri libertini* could be considered part of that cultural representation which, in the 1970s, was dealing with a new awareness of the relationship between subjectivity and sexuality and that lies at the basis of the two movements analysed here. Its representation of homosexuality (and transgender) was certainly groundbreaking, as I will show in the following chapters: in the narrative episode 'Mimi e istrioni', furthermore, the writer focuses on a group of politically active women and their relationship, giving an insight into the collective form of the second wave feminist movement.

The Peer Group and Marginalised Identities

In the analysis of the narrative texts selected for my study, institutions and family play a peripheral role in the process of growing up of the young male protagonists. Especially in the group of novels analysed in Chapter Three, the process of becoming a man as exemplified in the traditional *Bildungsroman* narrative fades to leave space for a new and very different approach to the

²⁷ Liliana Ellena, 'Storia e soggettività delle donne a Torino: Sguardi incrociati maschili e femminili, 1970–1980' (thesis, University of Turin, 1994).

²⁸ Passerini, 'Gender Relations', p. 153.

²⁹ *Fuori* stands for Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano (The United Italian Homosexual Revolutionary Front). In Italian, the word 'fuori' also means 'out'.

coming of age process. To come of age is no longer seen as a priority; on the contrary, young people seem to deliberately delay their entry into adulthood, postponing the responsibilities which come with adult status. In this sense, another useful term to identify while discussing the 'delaying of age' process is 'peer group': in the study of generational identities, the concept of peer group goes hand in hand with the idea of marginalisation, meaning the exclusion from society on the grounds of different values, beliefs, and behaviour. These terms are all helpful in guiding my analysis of generational delaying of age in Chapter Three, where I will analyse the younger generation between the 1970s and the 1980s as represented by Tondelli in *Altri libertini*, and the younger generation of the late 1980s and of the new millennium, in the works by Veronesi (*Gli sfiorati*) and Culicchia (*Brucia la città*). Despite their differences, all these generations, in fact, share a sense of marginalisation from adult society: they could be considered as youth subcultures inasmuch as they 'reject adult culture and use symbols designed to negate conventional adulthood. These symbols range from language to dress, personal adornment, and actual behavioral presentations of the self'.³⁰ As I will show in the following chapter, the process of growing up for young people is deeply influenced by their belonging to a subculture or, better, by their identifying themselves as part of their peer group, therefore substituting individual identity with a generational identity. As the authors of *Generation on Hold* argue, '[t]he more an individual becomes involved in a subculture and the more radical the subculture, the more difficult it is for that person to come of age and enter mainstream adult society' (Côté and Allahar, p. 21). If the male protagonists of the novels analysed in Chapter Three seem to find validation of their identities within the group of peers, a different trend seems to characterise the process of coming of age for the protagonists in Chapter Four. As I will show, individuality replaces the generation in the process of coming of age: the male protagonists of the novels by Tondelli and Culicchia selected in this chapter attempt to restore a traditional coming of age pattern, to express their needs and desires, and see them accepted by society. However, a delaying of age process takes place for these men, too. For Tondelli's protagonist in *Camere separate*, Leo, delaying his maturity means hiding his homosexuality from society, making it an irrelevant part of his identity. In

³⁰ James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 21.

Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra* and *Paso Doble*, Walter is a young man who refuses integration within an adult society which no longer represents his values. Finally in Culicchia's *Ameni inganni*, the 'delaying of age' strategy adopted by Alberto consists of retreating to his adolescence, avoiding those responsibilities such as getting a job, and leaving the family of origin, which, in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, would have ratified adulthood.

The changes within society in terms of generational and gender roles outlined so far affect the evolution of the coming of age process for young people in contemporary Italy. In the following sections, I will focus on the familial context, the work environment, and consumption.

The Italian Family and Its Contradictions

When speaking of family in relation to the coming of age narrative, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the family of origin of the male protagonist and the new family he should start and financially support in order to become a man and complete his process of transition from childhood to adulthood. The family is not only one of the cornerstones of Italian society, it also works as a pervasive metaphor, since, according to Ginsborg, 'it is not the state or any organization in society which provide examples for the family, but the family which provides metaphors and role models for society and the state'.³¹ With the fading of social institutions' power, then, the familial context provided, at least theoretically, an example of *italianità* and a model for young people to recreate such a social environment. The first change that can be detected in studying Italian families lies in the decrease of fertility levels which, after the so-called baby boom, made Italy one of the countries with the lowest number of children in Europe. The reasons behind this demographic issue are complex and they cannot easily be summed up here. From the relative emancipation of women, their increasing enrolment to higher education degrees and, more recently, the uncertainty of the labour market, many factors have contributed to making the Italian family, 'long and thin': 'long in the sense of adult children staying at home; thin because of declining fertility rates' (Ginsborg,

³¹ Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents*, p. xiii.

p. 74).³² It is clear that it is not possible to speak of *the* Italian family without the risk of annulling the individuality of each single case. If the 'model' outlined above corresponds to a generalised idea of family structure, it is interesting to notice that, in the novels analysed in this work, the role of family is – in the majority of cases – very peripheral in these young men's lives. Understandably, the younger generation represented in Tondelli's *Altri libertini* was self-sufficient in its search for an identity: indeed, as I have argued above, the 1970s as a period of social upheaval tended to create a schism between younger and older generations. More generally, for the novels which represent a generational coming of age pattern – in Chapter Three – there is the sense of a profound detachment between 'sons' and 'fathers', the marginalisation of the former being based on the impossibility of identification for young people within adult society. In studying the evolution of the Italian family, Ginsborg noticed that despite '[t]he autonomy of much of northern urban youth and its partial challenge to the family in the late sixties and early seventies',³³ a renewed attachment to the family unit characterises Italian society in the 1980s. Noticing an increasing process of 'individualisation' within the family, he argued that the relative independence of family members in terms of roles and responsibilities had not compromised, but further reinforced, the very Italian phenomenon of the long family.

Staying at Home: *Mammismo*

Both stereotype and social phenomenon, the so-called *mammismo* – the trend for grown-up children to stay at home well into adult life – is often used to describe the tendency for young people in Italy to delay their entry into adult life, symbolised, in this case, by the difficulty in creating a new family. In analysing this phenomenon, it is worth distinguishing between its representation as a specific feature of the Italian character and, on the other hand, the economic and social repercussions that *mammismo* has for contemporary Italian society.

³² The 'delay syndrome' is one of the causes of low fertility in Italy: it affects, according to Ginsborg, 'end of education, entry into the labour market, exit from the family, entry into union, and formation of an independent household' (Ginsborg, p. 74). Also see Alessandra De Rose, Filomena Racioppi, and Anna Laura Zanatta, 'Italy: Delayed Adaptation of Social Institutions to Changes in Family Behaviour', *Demographic Research*, 19 (2008), 665–704 (p. 689).

³³ Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943–1988* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 414.

Silvana Patriarca traces the birth of *mammismo* back to the post-1945 period when it became one of the defining aspects of the Italian character.³⁴ More specifically, the image of the mama's boy and its link to Italian manliness was spread and reinforced through cinema,³⁵ which, as I have already highlighted, in the 1950s offered a powerful set of images to young men, guiding them through their gender identification. The journalist Corrado Alvaro, writer and commentator of Italian society at that time, defines *mammismo* as an 'Italian complex', blaming the 'irresponsible mothers' for having brought up 'shrewd and insolent' boys, who are unable to sever the link with the family of origin and to become responsible individuals.³⁶ While women were being held responsible for the failed coming of age of their sons, the *mammone* might be better interpreted as 'a metaphor of dependence' which was very much a consequence of the recent traumatic war events, making the link between masculinity and impotence/failure an aspect of the Italian national character.

Despite its historical and popular roots, *mammismo* has been at the centre of economic and social debates in Italy in recent times, often recalled in conjunction with discussions about what has been defined *lunga gioventù*. I would argue, indeed, that to the long family structure identified by Ginsborg corresponds a prolonged youth, a state of dependence – economic and/or emotional – on the family of origin, which makes young men (and increasingly women) live as if in a ceaseless adolescent status. In 2009, around seven million unmarried men and women between eighteen and thirty-four years of age lived with the family of origin (58.6% of all the unmarried people in the same age group in Italy). In the last thirty years, the number of young people who have decided to stay in the family of origin has increased: between 1983 and 2009 the number of people between twenty-five and twenty-nine living at home has almost doubled (from 34.5% to 59.2%), with an increase also in the thirty- to thirty-four-year-old age group (from 11.8% to 28.9%). Furthermore, these data have to be analysed from a gender perspective, since sons seem to

³⁴ Patriarca explains the difference between national character and national identity: despite the fact these two notions might often overlap, 'national character tends to refer to the "objective" settled dispositions (a set of distinctive moral and mental traits) of a people, while national identity [...] tends to indicate a more subjective dimension of perception'. Silvana Patriarca, *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 2–3.

³⁵ Patriarca makes reference to the role of the mama's boy impersonated by Alberto Sordi in various movies.

³⁶ Corrado Alvaro quoted in Patriarca, *Italian Vices*, p. 217.

prolong their stay at home more compared to daughters: the most pronounced difference between genders lies in the thirty- to thirty-four-year-old age group, with 36.9% of men and 19.8% of women still living with their parents (68.8% of men and 48.8% of women in the twenty-five- to twenty-nine-year-old age group).³⁷

At the basis of this phenomenon lies, predominantly, a complex economic situation, triggered by increasing insecurity concerning the work environment (as I will show in the following section). However, individuals' choices must not be underestimated, since in some cases – in some parts of Italy and for certain social classes – living at home might be seen as a choice rather than a necessity. While considering *mammismo* only a stereotype would mean ignoring the impact that this phenomenon has on Italian society, especially on the younger generations, the texts I selected in this work offer a different perspective on the difficult process of coming of age in contemporary Italy. In the majority of the novels analysed, in fact, the 'delaying of age' does not imply a retreat into the family of origin. On the contrary, it develops as an inclusion within the peer group and/or a strong opposition to familial and, more generally, adult figures, who are blamed for complying with the social system and, indeed, symbolising it. The prolonged youth – or the delaying in defining themselves as adults – does not necessarily correspond to a desire to stay within the family of origin; on the contrary, it develops as a form of reaction to *mammismo*. An identification within the peer and generational group (as in Chapter Three) or a desire for individualisation and detachment from society (as represented by Walter and Leo, the protagonists in Culicchia's and Tondelli's novels in Chapter Four), the 'delaying of age' is for these young (or less young men) a conscious choice: the choice to wait for more favourable social and economic conditions. Therefore, there seems to be a discrepancy between the reality of youth conditions and the way in which it has been represented by

³⁷ The figures quoted above are taken from an Istat study on youth condition in Italy: the authors also highlight differences between data according to regional belonging: 'La permanenza dei giovani nella casa dei genitori evidenzia un gradiente geografico Nord-Sud che penalizza ancora una volta il Mezzogiorno: la quota più elevata di giovani in famiglia si registra nel Sud (65,3 per cento) e la più bassa nel Nord-Est (52,4 per cento). Tra i giovani maschi di 18–34 anni che risiedono nelle Isole oltre il 70 per cento vive nella famiglia di origine, la quota più elevata si registra in Sardegna'. See Alessandra Ferrara, Cristina Freguja, and Lidia Gargiulo, 'La difficile condizione dei giovani in Italia: Formazione del capitale umano e transizione alla vita adulta' (2011) <<http://www.istat.it/it/files/2011/02/Ferrara.pdf>> [accessed 30 November 2012].

Tondelli, Veronesi, and Culicchia, the only exception being Culicchia's portrayal of a *mammone* in his *Ameni inganni* (Chapter Four).

Precarietà and Precarious Identities

The key word to consider while discussing the work situation in this period is *precarietà* or *precariato*, meaning an unstable work environment in which there are no longer certain career prospects and, more generally, individual choice is reduced to a minimum. Such an unstable social situation provokes, as a consequence, a general sense of confusion among young people; if a professional status was a fundamental way of defining one's identity, in contemporary Italy one's occupation no longer has the same power of shaping identities. According to sociologist Maria Grazia Ricci,

[s]e il fulcro dell'identità moderna evolveva attorno a scelte fondamentali, come quelle della propria occupazione, della propria funzione nella sfera pubblica e della propria posizione nella famiglia, l'identità postmoderna sembra invece definirsi in uno spazio privo di vincoli forti e di 'luoghi' in cui sedimentare le esperienze, in una continua ricerca di riconoscimento sociale. Se nel primo caso l'investimento nel sistema educativo, l'esaltazione di una vita familiare stabile, un sistema di ruoli lavorativi fissi e riconosciuti socialmente aveva prodotto identità chiare, la cui prevedibilità dei percorsi di vita rientrava nell'orizzonte delle aspettative dell'epoca, nel secondo caso gli individui esistono in uno stato di continua costruzione e ricostruzione.³⁸

In order to understand the significance of *precarietà* in Italian society, it is necessary to go back to the youth protests of the 1970s. It is in that historical period that Italian youth culture – differently from the rest of Europe – 'differentiated itself from the adult world of labour through its orientation toward marginality and deviance'.³⁹ In search of different results, the youth movement was not interested in obtaining the right to work, yet they reclaimed 'the right to develop their individual capacities and to enjoy themselves'.⁴⁰ This new philosophy, therefore, contrasted with the old adult 'ideology', according to

³⁸ Maria Grazia Ricci, 'Flessibilità e memoria: Il doppio volto della contemporaneità', in *Homo instabilis: Sociologia della precarietà*, ed. by Mario A. Toscano (Milan: Jaca Book, 2007), pp. 971–1000 (p. 981).

³⁹ Monica Jansen, 'Reconstructing the "Bond" of Labour Through Stories of *Precarietà*: Storytelling According to Beppe Grillo, Aldo Nove, and Ascanio Celestini', *Romance Studies*, 28 (2010), 194–205 (p. 195).

⁴⁰ Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 296.

which 'labour is the fundamental value in social life' (Lumley, p. 301). However, it is necessary to highlight the transition of *precarietà* from a positive and empowering concept (as in the 1970s) to a negative and forced exclusion from the work environment. In other words, starting as a collective refusal to work in order to reclaim 'worker's autonomy and "self-valorization"',⁴¹ in the post-Fordist society of the 1980s *precarietà* becomes an imposed condition and the only employment modality for the majority of young people, an issue that has become more prevalent since the 1990s.

A precarious lifestyle and an uncertain financial situation are certainly two of the reasons behind young people's delaying of responsibilities, first and foremost as they find it impossible to leave their family of origin to start their own. From this perspective, then, *precarietà* and *mammismo* are strictly intertwined: according to Marco Iezzi and Tonia Mastrobuoni, '[i]l sintomo più evidente della dilagante precarietà è dunque la difficoltà crescente, per i giovani, di emanciparsi dalla propria famiglia di origine'.⁴² A study promoted by Istat in 2009 underpins this connection, by finding out that:

la permanenza prolungata dei giovani in famiglia è uno dei principali problemi del paese. Fattori economici, in particolare l'accesso dei giovani al mercato del lavoro e al mercato abitativo da un lato, e fattori culturali dall'altro, sono fondamentali nella realizzazione delle intenzioni di uscita dalla famiglia di origine.⁴³

If, on the one hand, the decision not to leave the family of origin can be seen as a cultural and/or individual choice, on the other hand, financial reasons can be one of the prevalent motives.⁴⁴ Another important aspect of the *precarietà*, which certainly influences young people's relationship with adult society and their transition to adulthood, is the so-called *sottoinquadramento*. In 2009, Istat counted that one million people between the age of eighteen and twenty-nine were 'sottoinquadrate', which is to say that they were currently employed in inferior job positions compared to their level of education and

⁴¹ Jansen, 'Reconstructing the "Bond" of Labour', p. 195.

⁴² Marco Iezzi and Tonia Mastrobuoni, *Gioventù sprecata: Perché in Italia si fatica a diventare grandi* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2010), p. 26.

⁴³ Istat is the acronym for Istituto nazionale di statistica (the National Institute for Statistics). Istat, 'Le difficoltà nella transizione dei giovani allo stato adulto e le criticità nei percorsi di vita femminili', (2009) <http://www3.istat.it/salastampa/comunicati/non_calendario/20091228_00/testointegrale20091228.pdf> [accessed 30 November 2012].

⁴⁴ See Ferrara, Freguja, and Gargiulo, 'La difficile condizione dei giovani in Italia'.

training. If we include people aged between thirty and thirty-four, the total number of *sottoinquadriati* was 2,029,000 (Ferrara et al). These few snippets of data create a picture of a social condition in which younger strata of the population suffer an economic and occupational crisis which directly affects their process of transition from youth to adulthood. If the phenomenon of *mammismo* seems to be one of the consequences, it is not the only possible reaction. The analysis of the texts in the following chapters will show different ways of dealing with uncertainty in society: from the retreat into the peer group to the rejection of adult authority or *mammismo*, they all share a widespread disillusionment with social institutions. If society rejects its younger generations, depriving them of the opportunities to come of age, then young people's reactions are not only those of seeking support from the family, but also – and even more increasingly – of negating the necessity of coming of age by prolonging their adolescence and refusing to become adults in such difficult and unwelcoming conditions.

The Development of Consumer Identity

Another factor, which is worth exploring in relation to the coming of age of young men and women in contemporary Italy, is the issue of consumerism. The development of consumer behaviour is strictly intertwined with family relations and the work environment and, therefore, plays an important role in young people's acquisition of their identity, especially in terms of locating and identifying themselves within society. After a first phase of consumption development during the 'economic miracle', in which consumers were oriented towards bettering their home living conditions, from the 1970s onwards Italy witnessed another phase, which led consumption to overlap with new patterns of hedonistic behaviour. This new hedonism found an easy target in the younger generation – usually more open to changes – commodifying, from a certain perspective, the process of coming of age itself. As Ginsborg states,

[t]hrough the proliferation of television channels and the Internet, through video cassettes and video games, through 'Walkmen' and CD players, to mention only the most obvious instruments, the world of play, of emotions and

romance, of dreaming and imagination, became commodified on a mass scale.⁴⁵

Through new technologies, young people were able to find a space for themselves within society and the family. Though consumption was also connected to a desire for show – obsession for designer brands will be central in the young peer group analysed in Culicchia's *Brucia la città* – it might not only be considered as having a negative influence on individuals. Becoming part of a consumerist society was – and still is – for youth part and parcel of the process of coming of age, of identifying oneself through status symbols. Therefore, the consumption's cycle is based 'on a more deep-rooted and restless searching for identity and meaning through acquisition' (Ginsborg, p. 87).

While talking of *precarietà* I have highlighted the connection between the youth movement and work flexibility, which, at least in its beginnings, aimed to convey freedom of choice. The counterculture of the 1970s also had a very visible influence on consumption, placing 'personal "self-realization"' at the centre of the marketing and advertising discourse and, in a way, commodifying young people's rebellion. In other words, in contemporary consumer culture, consumption and identity become intertwined: the shaping of personal identity loses its dependence on work and politics to be 'carried out in a world of plural, malleable, playful consumer identities'.⁴⁶

Conclusion – 'Delaying of Age': An Italian Coming of Age?

This chapter aimed to provide an outline of the main issues to consider while analysing the various paths of coming of age faced by young men in contemporary Italy. Starting with a definition of the term 'generation' – an increasingly influential social cluster in the process of growing up – I then highlighted the changes undergone in the process of socialisation of young men within society, focusing more specifically on relationships within the family and the peer group, work environment, and consumption trends. Issues of gender relations are also central in my work and will become more visible in the analysis of the texts. In fact, on a social level, both young men and women have

⁴⁵ Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents*, p. 84.

⁴⁶ Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997). Quoted in Adam Arvidsson, 'From Counterculture to Consumer Culture: Vespa and the Italian youth market, 1958–78', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1 (2001), 47–71 (p. 48).

been almost equally affected by what has been defined 'postponement syndrome' (*sindrome del ritardo*). In his study of Italian youth, demography professor Massimo Livi Bacci has identified a focal stage in life which marks the completion of youth and the transition to adulthood: reproduction. Starting a new family and having children is, therefore, seen as the fundamental step to take to accomplish the coming of age process. Younger generations suffering from postponement syndrome have 'displaced until later in life the full assumption of those responsibilities that make of a person an autonomous and independent adult, able to make her or his own fundamental decisions, such as entering a stable relationship or having children'.⁴⁷ Despite statistical data showing that the majority of Italian men and women want to have children, 'their reproductive decisions appear as the final result of a series of steps that have to be taken in sequence' (Livi Bacci, p. 9).⁴⁸ to conclude the education process, secure a stable job, leave the family home, and find a partner to marry. A non-linear coming of age process, which delays the accomplishment of these steps, therefore causes postponement syndrome. Italian young men and women complete their education process late, tend to stay longer with their family of origin, and have more difficulties in finding a job and paying for accommodation. The circularity of this 'delaying of age', as I have termed the process, is also connected to the low fertility rates in the country, as I have already highlighted.

Delaying their coming of age seems, for Italian youth, a necessity, the only possible reaction to a society which makes a clear distinction between adults' and young people's prerogatives. In addition to the difficult social situation depicted above, in fact, there is another – connected – phenomenon which Livi Bacci calls 'perdita di prerogative'. The scholar argues that the weakening of financial resources is not the main reason for young people's retreat into youth; on the contrary, the problem lies in them being deprived of 'la capacità di conquistare autonomia, vedersi riconosciuti diritti (e doveri) uguali a quelli degli adulti e degli anziani, e partecipare a pieno titolo alla vita attiva secondo le inclinazioni e le competenze personali'.⁴⁹ The postponement syndrome is therefore twofold: on the one hand, it mirrors an economic and

⁴⁷ Massimo Livi Bacci, 'Too Few Children and Too Much Family', *Daedalus*, 2 (2001), 1–15 (p. 8).

⁴⁸ Also see Paolo De Sandre, Fausta Ongaro, Rosella Rettaroli, and Silvana Salvini, *Matrimonio e figli tra rinvio e rinuncia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997).

⁴⁹ Massimo Livi Bacci and Gustavo De Santis, 'Le prerogative perdute dei giovani', *Il Mulino*, 3 (2007), 472–81 (p. 472).

social system which does not allow young people to take up adult responsibilities; on the other hand, it systematically denies young people social rights and prerogatives which they could acquire only when aging. In the two following chapters, the analysis of the novels selected will offer a wide perspective on the delaying of age as an evolution of the coming of age narrative pattern. To speak of 'delaying of age' will mean to define a specific way of becoming men, which characterises Italy and its youth.

Chapter Three

Becoming Men Among 'Others': The Negotiation of a Generational Identity

The group of novels which I am studying in this chapter – Tondelli's *Altri libertini* (1980), Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati* (1990), and Culicchia's *Brucia la città* (2009) – illustrates one of the two possible developments of the 'delaying of age' pattern I am analysing in this work, linking the transition towards adulthood with the idea of generation. The chapter will investigate the relationship between the male protagonists and their peer group, identifying a change in role models and social values which seems to change from one generation to the other. After an introduction to the texts, I will focus my analysis on a close reading of a generational approach to the coming of age process, highlighting the role of social institutions and the familial environment, and drawing constant references to the social and cultural background outlined in Chapter Two. Despite the centrality of the generational element, I do not want to underestimate other analytical perspectives: the literary influence of the coming of age pattern and studies on gender and sexuality will form the foundations of my argument, as I will show in due course.

Marginalisation as Social Detachment: the Tondelli Generation

In order to contextualise my approach, I will now turn to the novels themselves, providing an overview of the themes and situations they portray. I will deal with this section chronologically, starting with Pier Vittorio Tondelli's debut work, *Altri libertini*. Published in 1980 by Feltrinelli, *Altri libertini* is a collection of six loosely connected stories: the protagonist of this 'romanzo ad episodi', as the writer himself defines it, is an Italian youth who is living in the transitional period in the late 1970s and early 1980s.¹ Critics and scholars alike classify the text as a *romanzo generazionale*, a label which has been discussed by Tondelli himself. In an interview conducted by Fulvio Panzeri, the author agrees with those critics who highlighted the importance of the generational component in *Altri libertini*,

¹ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, 'Altri libertini', in *Pier Vittorio Tondelli: Opere: Romanzi, teatro, racconti*, ed. by Fulvio Panzeri (Milan: Bompiani, 2000), pp. 5–144. All the references to Tondelli's *Altri libertini* are from this edition.

adding that his aim was ‘raccontare quelli che potevano essere chiamati dei “percorsi generazionali”’: this leads him to angle the texts towards precise readers (‘che avessero più o meno la mia età’), without needing to demonstrate an interest in the adults’ world. However, Tondelli’s narrative world was also to be considered generational in a specific sense; as the writer states (‘[t]u invece che cosa intendi per discorso generazionale?’)

Era il far riferimento a un orizzonte di comportamenti tipici di alcuni settori della cultura giovanile italiana o europea. Per me il discorso generazionale era quello. E i miei temi erano la droga, la libertà sessuale, l’emarginazione omosessuale, l’utopia... Rappresentava anche un gergo, consisteva anche nello scegliere di ascoltare o preferire determinati gruppi musicali piuttosto che altri o di occuparsi di un certo tipo di cinema. Tutto sommato implicava anche scelte di gusto che circoscrivevano una fascia di comportamenti, un tipo di sensibilità. Tutto, naturalmente in riferimento agli anni che si vivevano, al loro tempo preciso.²

For Tondelli, to write about youth means to focus on a specific subcultural group, one which is pre-encoded as marginalised and dissident. The author does not treat these marginalised groups as alienated from society, but simply considers them as aspects of a multifaceted youth. *Altri libertini* conveys to the reader the sense of a whole young generation in search of an identity; identity that is gained through a social identification with the peer group. The Tondelli generation, therefore, is a self-inclusive group whose members are not in need of adult figures. Their identity as members of the young generation is consolidated through communication – be that a particular slang, a taste in music, or cinema. In this regard, Elisabetta Mondello, while defining *Altri libertini* as an example of *Bildungsroman*, underlines the difference between Tondelli’s work and other coming of age narratives produced in the twentieth century:

Ciò che differenzia la raccolta/romanzo di Tondelli dagli altri romanzi di formazione novecenteschi (si pensi ad esempio a ‘classici’ quali *Agostino* di Moravia o *L’isola di Arturo* di Morante) è che nel suo caso, a vivere tale situazione di passaggio è un’intera generazione. Più che una singola individualità di un autore-narratore, infatti, a parlare sono tante soggettività che costituiscono un noi collettivo, un gruppo che è appunto una generazione.³

² Panzeri, *Il mestiere di scrittore*, pp. 981–83.

³ Mondello, *In principio fu Tondelli*, p. 20.

As Tondelli affirmed, language plays a pre-eminent role in characterising *Altri libertini*'s male protagonists. This jargon – often coarse and blasphemous – together with the description of situations that were blamed for inciting sexual depravity and contempt for the Catholic faith, caused the confiscation of all the copies available on the grounds of obscenity. The acquittal of both author and publisher proved that this juvenile slang was not used by the writer for the purpose of shocking readers and gaining attention in the media, but, on the contrary, was the expression of a more generalised mood which took hold of the younger generation in the seventies and eighties.⁴ In fact, the judges explained their decision admitting that '[v]i sono senza dubbio bestemmie, imprecazioni, parole volgari, senza tuttavia che il turpiloquio possa ritenersi fine a se stesso'. They acknowledged the use of a new literary style that they called 'scrittura parlata' and agreed on its use to represent young people, 'che usano certe parole, indipendentemente dal significato originario delle stesse, attribuendo loro un contenuto completamente diverso'.⁵

The same writing style returns in the second novel, *Pao Pao*, published by Feltrinelli in 1982, while in the texts produced in the second part of Tondelli's career there are significant stylistic changes. In the writing style of *Altri libertini*, vulgar terms and low, colloquial register are freed from any derogatory intention; the author's ambition was to create an immediate involvement of the reader within the fictional situation described and, more generally, to involve him/her in a generational atmosphere.⁶ If the generation of young men and women in their twenties in the 70s and the 80s communicated using a certain jargon, then this way of speaking has been faithfully reproduced by Tondelli, who was keen to give voice, in this text, to his peer group.⁷

⁴ *Altri libertini*'s new language includes the use of foreign words, sometimes written as they are pronounced – i.e. 'la miusic' ('Senso contrario', p. 103); neologisms – i.e. 'cinebrivido' ('Senso contrario', p. 99), and 'spolmonare' ('Viaggio', p. 49); and onomatopoeic words taken from comics or films – i.e. 'plumf' ('Altri libertini', p. 128), and 'slurp slurp' ('Viaggio', p. 55).

⁵ Quoted in Panzeri, *Altri libertini: Note ai testi*, p. 1114.

⁶ Tondelli theorised the role of language and orality in his writing in the essay 'Colpo d'oppio' (1980). See Pier Vittorio Tondelli, 'Colpo d'oppio', in *Pier Vittorio Tondelli: Opere: Cronache, saggi, conversazioni*, ed. by Fulvio Panzeri (Milan: Bompiani, 2001), pp. 779–82. He defined his literary style as 'letteratura emotiva' (p. 779), following in the footsteps of Thomas De Quincey's 'literature of power'. To be considered as belonging to the literature of power, or *letteratura emotiva*, a text should be able to strike the right note, by provoking in the readership a sense of participation and by making readers feel protagonists of the narration, a result which is achieved through a specifically targeted language.

⁷ It should be remembered that Tondelli was twenty-five years old when *Altri libertini* came out and, therefore, he was, at least chronologically, a member of the generational group he

Resisting Social Inclusion: The Veronesi generation

The title of Tondelli's text that I am considering here, *Altri libertini*, is emblematic inasmuch as it provides a definition of the generation at the centre of the narration: the same can be said for Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati* (1990).⁸ These *sfiorati* are a generation of young people who are barely touched ('sfiorati') by life, whose actions make no marks on the society around them. Mète, the protagonist of the novel, is a twenty-seven-year-old middle-class man who, against the backdrop of Rome in 1988, spends his life studying graphology. This activity allows him to understand people's identities but, as I will show in the following sections, prevents him from understanding his own identity. The narration follows a week in Mète's life, a period in which his routine is upset when his half-sister Belinda moves in: after his second wedding, Mète's father goes on honeymoon with his new wife, and the seventeen-year-old girl, problematic but very attractive, is left to Mète's care. Troubled by the presence of the girl, Mète finds himself struggling to resist her sexual attraction and, in the end, has sex with her. Several other narrative episodes intertwine with this main central development, and contribute to giving readers a sense of a generation of heterosexual men who have lost traditional values and reference points. Nights out, girls, drugs, and casual sex: youth's new values are in competition with Mète's own beliefs, which derive from his traditional religious education. If this brief summary has only the function of sketching the novel's plot, later in this chapter I will analyse in greater detail Mète's process of delaying of age by looking at the themes which this generation shares with the Tondelli and Culicchia generation.

Mète does not seem totally integrated in his generation, as he often looks at his own peer group from a detached point of view, as I will show later on in the close reading of the novel; as the narrator says, '[g]li piacque sentirsi parte di una minoranza, una qualsiasi, mentre camminava quel pomeriggio verso il Campidoglio. [...] [l]ì dove si trovava, a Roma, esistevano davvero solo le minoranze (di cui si fa parte per ragioni d'identità) e la massa (di cui tutti fanno

described in his first literary work. However, Tondelli always considered himself as separated from his generational group, as outlined in the Introduction to this work.

⁸ Sandro Veronesi, *Gli sfiorati* (Milan: Mondadori, 1990). All the references to Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati* are from this edition.

parte, anche le minoranze). Non esisteva nessuna maggioranza' (pp. 26–7). The process of coming of age for Mète is characterised by an active, even if in the end not successful, resistance to integration within the peer generational group. Belinda, on the contrary, embodies all the characteristics of the generation and I will explain this further in the following section on parental figures.

Before introducing the third novel analysed in this chapter, I would like to make a last point, about the issue of language. In *Altri libertini* and, as I am about to show, in Culicchia's *Brucia la città*, the young generation expresses itself via the medium of a jargon, which, therefore, works as the mirror of a separate subculture. By contrast, in *Gli sfiorati* Veronesi makes use of a literary language that clearly illustrates Mète's separateness from the world. The narrator observes the narrative action from a distant point of view, as a scholar whose interest in human behaviour finds an attractive subject of study in Mète. Hence, the stark difference between this and the other two texts lies in a completely different approach to the generational subject: if in Tondelli's and Culicchia's novels the writers step aside in order to leave the scene to the fictional protagonists,⁹ Veronesi exerts an active role, acting as a scriptwriter who selects situations and points of view for the reader. As Raffaele La Capria puts it, in *Gli sfiorati*'s afterword, '[q]uesta voce del narratore va dentro e fuori del romanzo, e lo subisce, lo irride, lo insegue, lo perde, lo riacciuffa, a volte se ne annoia';¹⁰ and, I would add, it successfully manages to present the narrative subject – the young generation – from a distant, external perspective.

The Culicchia Generation: A Western Model of 'Delaying of Age'?

The last novel included in this chapter is set two decades after *Gli sfiorati*: Iaio, the protagonist of Culicchia's *Brucia la città*, is a thirty-three-year-old DJ who lives in Turin in 2007.¹¹ The narration follows a few weeks of his life, starting from the sudden disappearance of Allegra, Iaio's girlfriend. However, what

⁹ *Altri libertini*'s episodes are narrated through the voice of an external narrator that, however, bears similarities with Tondelli himself, creating a three-step connection: writer, fictional protagonists, and real young generation.

¹⁰ Raffaele La Capria, 'Postfazione', in *Gli sfiorati*, ed. by Sandro Veronesi (Milan: Mondadori, 1990), pp. 373–81 (p. 377).

¹¹ Giuseppe Culicchia, *Brucia la città* (Milan: Mondadori, 2009). All the references to Culicchia's *Brucia la città* are from this edition.

Brucia la città really offers to the reader is an – ironically exaggerated – account of a younger generation. The protagonist and his close group of male friends move between parties and social events in an almost unrecognisable city, constantly under the influence of cocaine. Their generational motto is to be young and creative; music, drugs, and fun are their only objectives in life. In a world turned upside down, models and points of reference are consequently misplaced, leading to a situation in which Paris Hilton is considered the only real icon of the time. If, in the first two novels, the role of society in the subject's life has shrunk leaving the protagonist entirely preoccupied by individual (and generational) needs, here this situation is played to the extreme: Culicchia's twenty-first-century Turin is run by ambiguous characters, whose names explicitly convey the sense of a society ruled by criminality, bribery, and corruption.¹² The city's changes are testified to by the increasing number of top models and famous people gravitating every night and day around the city centre and those social values and institutions that are usually associated with modern societies – family, the state, education, and religion – are either totally absent, or interfere in the narration as digressions.

In analysing the construction of the young male characters in this text, I would argue that a fairly monolithic and stereotypical idea of masculinity is conveyed: Culicchia re-elaborates gender roles and dynamics, and the result is a male generation which, as I will show in my analysis, constructs its gender identity by imposing a virile attitude against women and constantly refusing to take up an adult role within society, preferring instead to display adolescent and irresponsible behaviours. Culicchia represents Italian young men as belonging to a narcissistic generation, in which the cult of the individual self plays a central role in the process of coming of age. The idea of a narcissistic younger generation in contemporary society might also be traced in the representation of youth outside the Italian context, especially in the Anglophone world. Despite the differences between Italian and British and American societies, it might be

¹² With a stylistic technique already noted in *Il paese delle meraviglie*, Culicchia names *Brucia la città*'s characters using modified verbs which denote their main moral – or immoral – behaviour and attitude. The list, just to name a few, includes town councillors Mintasco, Mincenso, and Marrangio, the banker Denaro, and the building contractor Deturpi. Also see Giuseppe Culicchia, *Il paese delle meraviglie* (Milan: Garzanti, 2004).

interesting to look at the representation of the Culicchia generation through the lens of Western popular culture.¹³

As I have shown in Chapter Two, while discussing the search for new role models among young men in Italy in the aftermath of the Second World War, American culture plays an important role for Italy's own cultural models, and social change has often been introduced through cinematic representations. More recently, it is through the cinematic genre of the romantic comedy that young men – and their peer group – are often represented in their transition towards adulthood. As identified by Claire Mortimer in her *Romantic Comedy*, the character at the centre of such a kind of cinematic genre 'represents a new generation of single men who are reluctant to take on responsibility and commitment, presenting a threat to the continuity of society'.¹⁴ What is at stake, in romantic comedies and consequently in the society they represent, is the normative configuration of the relationships between sexes, traditionally embodied by marriage.¹⁵ Although it is not possible to identify a romantic pattern in Culicchia's novel under analysis here, I would however suggest that what is instead present is a more general threat towards those social models and roles that are no longer perceived as an objective for young men in their process of coming of age.¹⁶ More specifically, I argue that traditional social paradigms such as starting a family through marriage and providing for it thanks to a good job are already deprived of their original meaning: in fact, as I will explain while analysing the novels in this chapter, they have lost their values in a world which is increasingly ridden with uncertainty and which seems to lack the opportunity for bettering oneself which was instead central in the coming of age narrative. What is at stake, therefore, is the very idea of coming of age, a concept which has lost any appeal for younger generations: when analysing contemporary generations it is no longer possible, in my opinion, to apply

¹³ The following discussion aims to draw possible parallels between representation of youth in very different social and cultural contexts, with the purpose of showing the mutual influences these society have on each other. However, my reading of the coming of age pattern in Culicchia's novel later in this chapter will make specific reference to the historical and cultural overview offered in Chapter Two.

¹⁴ Claire Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 48.

¹⁵ I am not discussing here the way in which rom-coms actually tend to reinforce traditional and normative life paradigms, as I only aim to draw a parallel between the representation of young men and their relation to society.

¹⁶ Commenting on American younger generations, producer and director Judd Apatow – who deals with issues of male coming of age in his films – says: 'I don't imagine that American men have ever found it easy to grow up... But now you can *delay* it your whole life'. Quoted in Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, p. 63. Emphasis added.

previous and now outdated models of socialisation, which were based on the individual's transition through a series of life phases or rites of passage. While in Tondelli's and Veronesi's novels the male protagonist and his generation delay their process of coming of age – with different outcomes – in order to find a suitable moment to make their way into society, in Culicchia's *Brucia la città*, I would argue, the very idea of coming of age is increasingly distrusted. In this sense, I would suggest that it is possible to identify, in Western popular culture and society, the emergence of a new role model of masculinity, who increasingly faces life's challenges with an 'immature' behaviour, privileging youth over the responsibilities implied by the adult status.¹⁷ The delaying of social responsibilities is now a possible outcome of the coming of age process and, in *Brucia la città*, this is represented by laio and his friends' retreat into a close male bonding, which, as I will show later, is based on individualistic and narcissistic behaviour.

If the 'delaying of age' can be read as a model of coming of age which is increasingly represented in Western society, I would like to add a further reference to the Anglophone world – in this case, to a specific British context – by questioning a model of masculinity which, under certain circumstances, might be helpful in analysing the construction of male identity in the Culicchia generation. The 'new lad' is a male identity pattern that, between the 1980s and 1990s, and mainly in the British context, was used by the media to depict a certain tendency among men to represent their gender identity through post-/anti-feminist attitudes and a strong heteronormativity. As Rosalind Gill defines it,

The 'new lad' is depicted as hedonistic, post- (if not anti) feminist, and pre-eminently concerned with beer, football, and 'shagging' women. His outlook on life could be characterized as anti-aspirational and owes a lot to a particular classed articulation of masculinity. A key feature of some constructions of 'new lad' is the emphasis on his knowing and ironic relationship to the world of serious adult concerns.¹⁸

¹⁷ I would like to further state here that this monolithic reading of contemporary youth identity does not want to be representative of younger generations as a whole, but only aims to shed light on one of the ways in which young people are represented in Western popular culture. As for the Italian case, Culicchia's representation is, as I have already argued, an exaggerated depiction of reality. At the same time, the Culicchia generation, despite not representing the only way of coming of age in contemporary Italian society, should be construed as one of the many facets that the 'delaying of age' process could assume.

¹⁸ Rosalind Gill, 'Power and the Production of Subjects: A Genealogy of the New Man and the New Lad', in *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines*, ed. by Bethan Benwell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 34–56 (p. 37).

Again, it is important to stress here the differences between British and Italian society, especially on the grounds of a classed construction of the 'new lad' which does not find a correspondence in the Italian context. Nonetheless, my attention is here focused on the consequences that such laddish behaviour and lifestyle could have on the coming of age process of younger generations of men. As Gill argues, in fact,

the new lad's individualistic, hedonistic, pleasure-seeking attitude must also be understood as a reaction to and rebellion against the figure of the male as 'breadwinner' and family provider. In this context the 'new lad' offers a refuge from the constraints and demands of marriage and nuclear family. He opened up a space of fun, consumption and sexual freedom, unfettered by traditional adult male responsibilities. (Gill, p. 47)

In this sense, the new lad attitude as a retreat into adolescent and non-normative (non-adult) behaviours might be construed as a way of delaying the coming of age process, postponing adult duties, and enjoying the simple pleasures offered by a responsibility free lifestyle. As I will show in the analysis of *Brucia la città*, the Culicchia generation seems – despite the differences between the two national social contexts – to adopt many of the characteristics of this 'new lad' model.

Before moving on to the next section, I would like to tackle briefly another characteristic typical of the Culicchia generation: like Tondelli in *Altri libertini*, Culicchia also uses language to convey a generational feeling. Having published his first short stories in *Papergang*, one of the volumes that came out of Tondelli's *Progetto Under 25*, Culicchia seems to have inherited some aspects of Tondelli's mode of writing. This influence is clearly evident in *Brucia la città*. Culicchia tries to reproduce youth jargon, and speaks through the voices of Iaio and his friends: the dialogues are often coarse, and Italian mixes fluently with English words, mainly in order to express the fictional characters' youthfulness and professionalism. Culicchia, in fact, uses English in the text to suggest the professional environments in which Iaio works, as a DJ and a copywriter. For instance, in the chapter entitled 'Brainstorming', the narrator gives this description of the members of the advertising agency for which he works: 'noi della F.U.F.F.A. siamo giovani, ribelli e creativi, e facciamo *viral marketing*, cioè *subliminal advertising*, o volendo *guerrilla marketing*'. If an

English influence is sometimes unavoidable in job contexts, the use of English words as part of a certain generation's slang is further reinforced in the novel. Thus, Chicco, the agency director, 'che ha una casa a New York, ama sfoggiare soprattutto in presenza di milanesi la sua conoscenza dell'inglese per far vedere che noi torinesi non siamo provinciali. E al fondo di ogni frase piazza un *oh yeah*'; and the brainstorming session aims to find '[u]n nuovo nome per Torino. Un nome *hip, cool, young*, un nome *charming, successful, friendly*, un nome *brand-new, up-to-date, yé-yé*: o se volete, un nome *hot, oh yeah*'.¹⁹ As Kate Litherland suggests in her study on 'Literature and Youth in the 1990s', orality occupies an important place in the works of young Italian authors who started writing in the 1990s. Their main stylistic influences were popular culture, music, television and cinema, post-war American writers after the Second World War, and Italian writers of the 1980s, especially Tondelli.²⁰

Another stylistic device that Culicchia has adapted from Tondelli is the presence of extensive and detailed descriptions – in the form of lists – which both authors use to convey a sense of generational identity. We can see this clearly in Tondelli's description of Annacarla's attic in *Altri libertini's* homonymous story, and in Culicchia's portrayal of Allegra's flat in *Brucia la città*, where they both list a various array of objects (books, music cassettes, CDs and DVDs, posters, clothes, etc.) that clearly depict the generational setting. It is interesting to compare these two 'generations' by giving some examples from the texts. Tondelli's description runs for almost three pages, with little punctuation; the following short excerpts provide a flavour of the writing style. The Tondelli generation is represented through books: 'gli Oscar Mondadori sparsi qua e là e tutt'intera la collezione dei Classici dell'Arte Rizzoli [...] tra la collana grigio-bianca di Psicologia e Psicoanalisi di Feltrinelli, gli Strumenti Critici Einaudiani e quelli di Marsilio e di Savelli [...]'; through incense: 'incensi Made in India sempre accesi e sparsi [...]'; through posters and photos hanging

¹⁹ Culicchia, *Brucia la città*, pp. 36–39.

²⁰ Litherland also interestingly discusses the use of the word 'jargon' to indicate this reproduction of orality in narrative works. I agree with her on the fact that any ambiguity concerning the use of this term and its Italian translation as *gerghi* must be avoided. She states that this term 'does not have a pejorative quality and overtones of inarticulacy that are unnecessary in this context': for this reason, she adds, many in sociolinguistics 'use the more neutral term "linguaggi" to refer to these varieties, thus emptying the term of any negative connotations' – Kate Litherland, 'Literature and Youth in the 1990s: Orality and the Written in Tiziano Scarpa's *Cos'è questo fracasso?* and Caliceti and Mozzi's *Quello che ho da dirvi*', in *Orality and Literacy in Modern Italian Culture*, ed. by Michael Caesar and Marina Spunta (London: Legenda, 2006), pp. 105–16 (p. 115).

on the walls: 'Mark Frechette e Daria Halprin spersi nel boro di Zabriskie Point [...] Pierre Clementi nei Cannibali di Liliana Cavani, [...] Al Pacino in Panico a Needle Park [...], il ciuffo di Yves Beneyton nei Pugni in Tasca, [...] le fotografie [...] come quella di Francesco Guccini, di Peter Gabriel, di Marco Ferreri [...]'; and through music: 'Jefferson Airplane e Soft Machine, qualcosina dei Gong e degli Strawbs e qualcos'altro di Lou Reed [...] Trespass dei Genesis [...] Bob Marley'.²¹

While Tondelli's description gives the sense of an educated generation whose taste in cinema, music and literature is rather intellectual, the Culicchia generation, here seen through Iaio's eyes, seems from the outset very different. When the protagonist arrives at Allegra's flat, hoping to see her, he instead finds her two female flatmates. Culicchia describes this scene using Tondelli's list narrative technique. The predominant elements are clothes and shoes, which are heaped among 'pile disordinate di "Vogue" e "Vanity Fair" e "Gioia" e "Glamour"'; books are mainly 'testi universitari apparentemente intonsi di diritto privato e architettura'; taste in music and cinema is represented by 'ben tre cd di Justin Timberlake [...] e dvd di *Kill Bill I e II* e di *Sex and the City*'.²² Clearly what above all defines the young generation is fashion: Culicchia introduces his characters by listing the brands of the clothes and shoes they wear, and designer brands are also central in the descriptive passage I am analysing here.²³ Cultural icons – the symbols of the Tondelli generation – are replaced in Culicchia's novel by icons of consumption: the male characters' fashionable and hedonistic way of life seems to further reinforce my reading of the Culicchia generation as working new ways of representing young male identities in Western society into a more specific Italian style.

Inside the Generation: Creating New Role Models

Individuals' identity as part of a generational group comes from their sharing a common cultural and social framework, a *habitus* – as Bourdieu would define it – that informs the world in which subjects perform their selves. According to

²¹ Tondelli, *Altri libertini*, pp. 112–14.

²² Culicchia, *Brucia la città*, p. 355.

²³ For instance, Iaio finds in Allegra's attic 'calzature di ogni tinta e materiale e foggia, Prada, Miu Miu, Manolo Blahnik, Converse, Nike, Blundstone, Camper' – Culicchia, *Brucia la città*, pp. 355–56. Iaio usually describes himself and his mood through what he wears, in a ceaseless competition with his peers to own exclusive limited edition clothes.

Bourdieu, '[t]he *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history'.²⁴ Jenkins – who reads Bourdieu's *habitus* as influenced by present and past social actions – offers this explanation to this rather opaque definition: 'the objective world in which groups exist, and the objective environment – other people and other things – as experienced from the point of view of individual members of the group, is the product of the past practices of this generation and previous generations'.²⁵ Therefore, the younger generational group, with all its values, beliefs, and behaviours, is not only a product of youth culture, but is also determined by – in this precise cultural and temporal context usually as a reaction against – the older generation. In this section, I will focus on the *habitus* which characterises the three generations, showing how within the generational group relations between peers replace adult figures found in a traditional family structure and how the young male protagonist relates with the peer group. Although mostly absent from the narration, adult characters play an important role in these three novels: their 'presence' haunts the young male protagonist, shaping his experience of growing up, and driving him to retreat into the peer group.

The 'Brotherhood' Structure in Tondelli's *Altri libertini*

As I have already highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, the generational focus adopted by Tondelli in *Altri libertini* is very precise and it specifically defines the boundaries of the young generational group by marginalisation from the rest of society. From a sociological point of view, the young protagonists in this text are part of a 'subcultural group', formed in response to the fact that they 'do not find meaning in their lives because of the marginalisation from adult society',²⁶ a marginalisation that, as in Tondelli, has largely to do with sexual choices. It is, therefore, this exclusion from society that makes the Tondelli generation a self-reliant group, which does not need adults as role models. Since it is impossible to come of age as homosexual men in an Italian heteronormative society, the only feasible solution for them is to delay their

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 54.

²⁵ Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 80.

²⁶ Côté and Allahar, *Generation on Hold*, p. 20.

identity's negotiation and to retreat into the safer borders of the generational group of peers. The total absence of adult figures in *Altri libertini* is telling, because it reflects a real social situation. Despite lacking a politically saturated commitment in the traditional sense of the term,²⁷ *Altri libertini* is very much imbued with social and cultural references to Italian society in the 1980s. There are no direct references to the political upheaval of the time in *Altri libertini*: as Diego Zancani notes, '[o]f the main preoccupations in Italy at that time only one seems to be treated in a prominent way and in the first person: drug abuse; the other, political terrorism, is not mentioned'.²⁸ At first reading, Zancani's statement seems to leave out a major element of the text: the representation of homosexual identities in the making. However, it is important to remember that homosexuality was not a main preoccupation for Italian society at that time; in fact, unlike drug abuse, dissident sexualities were not discussed as a social issue, and remained invisible. For the Tondelli generation, therefore, to come of age was more a matter of becoming visible in a society in which non-normative identities are 'foreclosed' from the very beginning.²⁹

When analysing this atypical process of coming of age, in which entry into the adults' world loses any formative value, we also need to consider the extensive changes affecting Italian society at that time. In the 1980s, Italy witnessed an increasing disengagement of youth from adults' supervision and responsibilities – a disruption of roles that affected one of its most influential institutions: the family. As seen in Chapter Two, the disruption of traditional gender and intra-generational roles within the family led to a weakening of the family's power in shaping identities, especially in the case of young people's coming of age process. Tondelli clearly describes this in *Altri libertini*, where the social and familial component is absent from the narrative and, at the same time, characters seem apathetic about social and political issues.

Before analysing the text in greater detail, I would like to introduce the theoretical framework I will adopt to study the generational 'delaying of age' process which characterises the Tondelli generation. As we have already seen,

²⁷ See the Introduction to this work and Burns' reading of Tondelli's oeuvre as a 'different' form of *impegno*, in Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, pp. 117–36.

²⁸ Zancani, *Pier Vittorio Tondelli: The Calm After the Storm*, p. 220.

²⁹ With regard to homosexual (in)visibility and 'the loss of homosexual objects and aims', Butler affirms that we are witnessing 'a preemptive loss': homosexual love is foreclosed, because it 'is from the start out of question, then it cannot happen and, if it does, [...] it happens only under the official sign of its prohibition and disavowal' – Butler, *Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification*, p. 27.

the young protagonists in *Altri libertini* might be thought of as belonging to a subcultural peer group, formed on the basis of shared cultural tastes and social beliefs, and a marginalised social status. Members of this subcultural group reject the normative and institutional social framework to which they are supposed to conform, and 'develop their own culture in an attempt to find a more meaningful identity'.³⁰ Therefore, the structure of this Tondelli generation, as it appears in the pages of *Altri libertini*, can be understood as a sort of new social regime with its own rules, and role models who are internal to the peer group. It is interesting, in this context, to compare Tondelli's subcultural group to what Juliet MacCannell has described as a 'Regime of the Brother'. Aiming to provide a critical interpretation of the failure of modernity in complying with that idea of liberty, equality, and fraternity which, in her opinion, should inform modern society, MacCannell offers a new interpretation of Freud's views on family, theorising the elimination of patriarchy and the creation of a new form of authority: the Regime of the Brother. What Freud called 'superego', MacCannell refers to as the 'It': the It stands for an unconscious collective form (the human collectivity), is gendered (male), and no longer has the function of playing a parental – father – role; the It does have a familial status, but it is the Brother. In post-Oedipal society, therefore, and according to Freud's theorisation of the 'artificial group', the leader-Brother 'is just like the members of his group – only greater. He is not necessarily Other, in the manner of a father, not an ego-ideal, but an ideal ego. [...] He claims no special right, he is not the privileged son or heir, but only one among brothers.'³¹ The Brother acts as a father; he imitates his role and social position and takes his place, replacing patriarchy with a new regime.

MacCannell's analysis here illustrated is convincing in so far as it theorises a 'society' of equals in which members of the same generational group share power and responsibilities. If this seems to be appropriate to describe the subcultural generational group in *Altri libertini*, it is however necessary to introduce a caveat in order to avoid confusion. In her work, MacCannell hypothesises the end of patriarchal society and its replacement by this new post-patriarchal Regime of Brothers; if the idea of a regime of peers is interesting for the analysis of the subcultural group, less acceptable is the idea

³⁰ Côté and Allahar, *Generation on Hold*, p. 21.

³¹ MacCannell, *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy*, p. 12.

of a post-Oedipal Italian society in the transitional period between the 1970s and the 1980s. By suggesting that the subcultural group in *Altri libertini* is a Regime of Brothers, I am not arguing that young people hold political and social power more widely in Italy; I am, on the contrary, highlighting the importance of a young social group which works completely independently from adult society.

A textual analysis of one of *Altri libertini*'s episodes will clarify my use of the 'Regime of the Brother' structure to represent the Tondelli generation as a subcultural generational group. Episode III, 'Viaggio', is emblematically representative of a process of identity acquisition through the experience of the outside world. The journey trope is a central element in the *Bildungsroman*, but here I will look at the second part of the narrative episode when the protagonist, returning from a trip to northern Europe, settles down in Bologna and starts his university degree. From a narrative point of view, 'Viaggio' presents a homodiegetic narrator: the story, in fact, is told in the first person by the anonymous protagonist, who, no longer young, recounts the memories of his youth. Starting in 1974, when the male protagonist is eighteen years old, 'Viaggio' tells the story of his difficult coming of age, intertwined with the negotiation of his sexuality within his peer group. As in a diary, the protagonist of 'Viaggio' explores the important stages of his life in relation to his sexual and romantic relationships. Furthermore, the passage of time in the narration is symbolically defined by the protagonist's birthdays, clearly giving the sense of a process of physical growth.

Read as 'un'educazione sentimentale',³² 'Viaggio' gives a vivid account of what it was like to be a young gay man in the late 1970s in Italy. However, Carnero rightly highlights the importance that sexual relationships assume in the process of identification of the young protagonist. The protagonist has his 'sexual initiation' with a girl in Brussels, but it is through his first homosexual experiences that he gains recognition of his sexuality by his peers. Gigi, one of his closest friends, 'dice che sono proprio un finocchio nato e sputato e io gli dico di sì, che la mia voglia di stare con la gente è davvero voglia e che non ci posso fare un cazzo se mi tira con tutti'.³³ The protagonist's homosexual desire makes him start a series of casual short-term relationships with other young

³² Carnero, 'Dalla "letteratura emotiva" alla "letteratura interiore"', p. 752.

³³ Tondelli, *Altri libertini*, p. 62.

men: sex is also often offered in exchange for drugs for himself and his friend and flatmate Gigi. Some of the elements of marginalisation with which Tondelli defines his characters (homosexuality and drug addiction) are here clearly embodied by the protagonist in 'Viaggio' and, more generally, are shared by the generational peer group within which he socialises. References to poverty, marginalisation, and exclusion from society run through the whole text: rent is always due – 'rimaniamo in arretrato [...] a giugno ci cacciano i carabinieri proprio quando dobbiamo sostenere gli esami per mantenere quei minimi soldi che da casa ci passano' (p. 65); jobs are often temporary and poorly paid – Gigi has a job as a 'sguattero malpagato' (p. 66), while the protagonist does not seem to have a job at all; and the house in which they live is nothing more than 'una topaia' (p. 66). Culture seems to be more important than wanting a better material life and the little money the protagonist manages to get from his partners is used to buy books ('un po' di Céline, un po' di Rabelais e un po' di Daniel Defoe', p. 68).

Members of the generational group at the centre of 'Viaggio' share social and financial marginalisation; they are aware of their position within society, and, despite their becoming increasingly despondent, they seem to accept their status without contesting it. There are no points of contact between the subcultural group – the Regime of Brothers – and the adults' world, other than financial support ('quei minimi soldi che da casa ci passano'), which helps them keep their bohemian lifestyles. The following quotation gives an example of how the protagonist seeks a social identification in the relationship with his peers, experimenting with his sexuality with several partners, and relating sex with financial survival:

Poi Christopher se ne va via che ha terminato il semestre ed è meglio così perché altrimenti me ne sarei innamorato cotto e lui non c'ha soldi e si sarebbe fatta la fame, bohème sempre bohème che due maroni. Sammy invece è ricco [...]. Io me lo faccio volentieri [...]. (p. 66)

The encounter with others within the peer group reinforces the protagonist's identification as a young gay man. Love and friendship play such a fundamental role in the protagonist's life that they replace family as the *locus* of socialisation and reinforce the generational boundaries. As noted by Enrico Palandri, the young generation in *Altri libertini* is constantly waiting for

something to happen: '[v]ogliono divertirsi, trasgrediscono le regole che spesso non conoscono, interpretano la parte che gli capita come *privi di destino e volontà*. E' un mondo dominato dall'*attesa* e dalla ricerca di qualcosa.'³⁴ The Tondelli generation refuses to accept the traditional steps of the coming of age process, such as taking up a job and starting a new family; adult duties are avoided, considered as a 'game' which bears no real responsibilities. An example from the text will clarify this point: after having started university in Bologna, Anna, Gigi's girlfriend, moves in with Gigi and the protagonist. Soon she discovers she might be pregnant and the news sparks controversial reactions from the two young men. Initially Anna's decision not to have an abortion worries her friends, but then they seem to accept her decision. However, the passage below will show how the whole issue is treated by the two men in a light way, which might be read, in normative terms, as irresponsible:

[p]erò il pensiero che dentro la pancia dell'Anna cresce come un fiore un bambinetto alla fine commuove anche Gigi, ma *giochiamo* alla sacra famiglia per non più di due giorni. E anche Anna capisce che è davvero impossibile che nella sua pancia ci sta un pargolino, perché sarebbe davvero un disastro alluvionato a scegliere di venire al mondo nel trojajo di via Massarenti. Dice che era solo un ritardo [...] e non doveva fidarsi in quel modo al *gioco* di mamma – non mamma [...]. Gigi sembra sollevato e dice che l'emozione di essere padre per quei giorni non lo faceva dormire e anch'io dico qualcosa.³⁵

This scene, which ends with Anna having a miscarriage, underlines the lack of adult responsibilities, emphasised by the use of 'giochiamo' and 'gioco' to describe Anna's pregnancy and the possible creation of a new family ('la sacra famiglia'); it also reinforces Palandri's thesis of a generation without 'destino e volontà' – a generation that is waiting for something to happen and change their destiny. Furthermore, I would also suggest that this quotation brings to the fore one of the fundamental elements of the 'delaying of age' crisis in Italy, which lies in the difficulty of imagining adulthood in ways other than the ones traditionally represented by social institutions. In this specific case, therefore, alternative models of family are, for the protagonists, particularly difficult to imagine.

³⁴ Enrico Palandri, 'Altra Italia', *Panta*, 9 (1992), 18–25 (p. 24). Emphasis added.

³⁵ Tondelli, *Altri libertini*, pp. 68–69. Emphasis added.

A change happens in the narration when the protagonist meets Dilo, who becomes his lover, and Gigi and Anna move to Rome to take up a job, but, as I am about to show, the protagonist's relationship with Dilo does not lead to a coming of age in a traditional sense. Tondelli describes this scene as a rite of passage in the protagonist's life, which makes him more aware of himself, yet it does not integrate him within a heteronormative society which systematically fails non-normative identities. Tondelli offers this description, which can certainly be read as a turning point in the lives of the protagonist and his friends:

eppoi si cresce, questo è innegabile, si cresce, perdio quanto siamo cambiati dall'estate di Amsterdam e non siamo più dei bambini che si sentono offesi, vogliamo le nostre responsabilità [...]. Insomma alla stazione ci salutiamo ed è come salutassimo noi stessi partire e sparire dal treno della prima giovinezza. (p. 70)

If, as Carnero has commented in relation to this narrative passage, the point of view of the protagonist embraces that of an entire young generation, 'priva di certezze, una generazione di adolescenti che, inevitabilmente, si trovano a crescere',³⁶ it is worth remembering that the Tondelli generation is always pre-encoded as dissident, marginalised, and non-normative – the subcultural group being a synecdoche for the generational group. The impossible integration within society as a homosexual man makes the protagonist retreat within the generational boundaries, adopting a 'delaying of age' strategy. References to the impossibility of homosexual identity run through the whole episode,³⁷ and, as in *Camere separate*, this failed identity negotiation also affects the protagonist's relationships. As I will show in Chapter Four, the impossibility of being recognised as homosexual by society is played to the extreme in *Camere separate*, where Tondelli narrates homosexual love as irreconcilable with heteronormative society. Whereas in *Camere separate* this identity crisis will assume drastic dimensions for Leo, for the protagonist in 'Viaggio', and more generally in *Altri libertini*, society's refusal of the protagonist's and his friends' individual identities reinforces the sense of a generational identity. The peer group becomes, therefore, a 'society' per se, a

³⁶ Carnero, 'Dalla "letteratura emotiva" alla "letteratura interiore"', p. 752.

³⁷ Dilo and the protagonist are physically and verbally assaulted on a bus (pp. 70–1), and the protagonist is sacked by a school in which he works due to his homosexuality (pp. 87–8).

Regime of Brothers with its own rules and life models. As already anticipated in the introductory section of this chapter, members of this generation cannot find a model for their coming of age in the adult world – society, family, educational, and religious institutions – and thus turn to their peers.

In 'Viaggio', for instance, the more experienced Dilo is the protagonist's role model, the 'leader-Brother', as MacCannell would define him. Dilo is the one who assists the protagonist during his rehabilitation to get over his alcohol addiction (p. 72) and he helps the protagonist studying for his university exams ('[d]olcissimo Dilo aiuta a studiacchiare per gli esami, ma a me non importa tanto di queste scadenze e invece è lui che dice di andare avanti, almeno per avere qualche soldo dai tuoi', p. 73). However, their relationship enters a profound crisis when Dilo realises that his lover totally depends on him; thus, he decides to leave him alone for a few weeks. If, at the beginning, the protagonist seems to be able to take care of himself ('Ma chissene frega amore mio, io ci sopravvivo lo stesso senza di te, lo vedrai diosanto, lo vedrai che sono ormai capace di farmi la mia vita da solo', p. 77), it is soon clear that without the help of Dilo – 'la gatta madre', 'il grande padre' – he is, in fact, not ready to face his life and the consequences that his sexual identity has on society. The dialogue between the two characters after Dilo's homecoming further supports the narrative trope at the centre of this chapter: the creation of new life models. While Dilo cannot accept the protagonist's passivity and his uncertainty around his sexual identity ('datti da fare, mica l'ubriacone da mattina a sera, sempre a piangere sulla mia spalla se uno ti dice finocchio', p. 78), he admits that their life as gay young men is far from ideal:

non è giusto che tu viva sempre addosso a me e lo so che non abbiamo un modello per il nostro amore, ma questo va anche bene perché ci obbliga a trovarcelo insieme tutti e due e crescere insieme e accettare quel che capita con tutte le conseguenze, mica bere o rimuovere o far finta che non accade niente anche dentro a noi solo perché ci vogliamo bene, cioè anche io ti amo, ma anche per questo vorrei che tu comprendessi che prima o poi sarai solo e questa storia la ricorderai se ti ha fatto crescere sul serio. (pp. 79–80)

The lack of a model for homosexual love is a narrative trope which also plays a central role in *Camere separate*; in *Altri libertini* and in the passage quoted above, this lack is however fulfilled by the negotiation of homosexual love and identity within the generational group. Butler's ideas on gender

performativity and the acquisition of a gender role within the family can be useful in helping us to analyse the problem of gender and sexual identification in this novel. Considering gender as socially constructed, Butler follows two parallel yet complementary lines; firstly, in her opinion, social recognition as a gendered subject is a compulsory condition of every identity, as it '*precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject'. However, that recognition is never complete and leaves room for 'the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation'.³⁸ Secondly – and this is central in my applying her theory to my discourse on generation – Butler does not see gender as a 'choice', a 'role', or a 'construction that one puts on', as this would imply the existence of an I, a subject, which precedes the gender. On the contrary, gender is a performative act, insofar as it 'is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted'; in other words, performativity is 'a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms' which one has to embody (Butler, pp. 21–2). The point I am keen to make is that these norms, which are assimilated by the subject in formation and that shape his/her gender identity – norms that are usually conveyed by the family – are here established on a generational level, within the Regime of the Brother. If, for the Tondelli generation, family loses any formative role, I argue that the *locus* of socialisation and recognition of one's gender and sexual identity is instead the generational group. In the text, the centrality of the peer group in the individual's gender and sexual socialisation is underlined by the protagonist himself, who defines his generation (homosexual peer group) as 'la razza più bella che c'è, me l'ha insegnato Dilo questo [...], noi sì che siamo una gran bella tribù'.³⁹

Within the Tondelli generation there is not only disillusionment with family and society, but also with school, which loses its formative value. After having been fired by a school in Milan due to his homosexuality, the protagonist returns to Bologna and, before leaving, writes a letter to his friend Gianni, who was working with him – a letter that, I would argue, effectively summarises his generation's point of view. While traditional ideas on education and growing up are undermined and destabilised, the Tondelli generation values experience over traditional upbringing and puts sexuality at the centre of the coming of age process, making it a fundamental rite of passage in youth's lives:

³⁸ Butler, 'Critically Queer', p. 18.

³⁹ Tondelli, *Altri libertini*, p. 85.

gli scrivo una lettera e gli dico che la strada per cambiare la scuola è ancora lunghissima e che non serviranno queste feste e queste uscite e che quando non ci sarà scuola la scuola allora sì che funzionerà e sarà bella finalmente, perché uno si alzerà e andrà al cinema e a fare all'amore ed è questa la scuola, cioè l'esperienza, mica la normalizzazione [...]. (p. 88)

To conclude my analysis of 'Viaggio' and of the process of coming of age for the Tondelli generation, I would like to return to the idea of traditional coming of age and compare it to its development in contemporary Italian narrative which I am arguing is a 'delaying of age' process. Palandri's definition – quoted in this section – of the generational group in *Altri libertini* as constantly waiting for something to happen can be linked to the social situation of those years. Since they postpone adult duties and responsibilities, delaying their coming of age, Tondelli's characters conform to that 'attesa' for more positive and appealing conditions that, as Ginsborg suggests, in the eighties was about to be transformed into a perennial and imposed condition. In this sense, *Altri libertini* reflects a social situation; it is the mirror of – or better it anticipates – an Italian society in which the transition that occurred between the 1980s and 1990s, from being 'a land of opportunity' to one with virtually no opportunities, was already apparent to the younger generation. Youth was the first group to experience this lack of 'opportunity' – opportunity was a key concept of the process of 'bettering themselves' in the family politics of the Italian Republic.⁴⁰ Therefore, the process of coming of age could no longer be accomplished in a traditional sense for two main reasons. Firstly, because of the lack of opportunity which permeates Italian politics, the economy, and culture: opportunity which was, indeed, at the very centre of the traditional process of coming of age, and which provided the protagonist with the ability and experience necessary to make the transition to adult life happen.⁴¹ Secondly, this process of coming of age is delayed because of the impossibility of homosexual identity, of being recognised by society as a gay man. Therefore, in a Regime of Brothers, gender and sexual identity is no longer sought within the family, but within the group of peers. The young gay man cannot find a role model or subjectivating norms within the heteronormative family and society; therefore, he looks for his

⁴⁰ Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents*, pp. 32–33.

⁴¹ See Moretti, *The Way of the World*.

peers' approval, and the generation becomes the *locus* of formation of non-normative gender and sexual identities.

Oedipal Desire and the Erotic Triangle in Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati*

The generational group I am analysing in this second section is profoundly different from the one represented in Tondelli's *Altri libertini*. In the ten-year gap between the Tondelli and the Veronesi generations, social and cultural trends already identified in Tondelli's narrative – disempowerment of social and political institutions, the impossibility of coming of age within adult society, and the consequent retreat into the peer group – seem to be consolidated. However, the generational group which is at the centre of Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati* is starkly different from the marginalised generation in *Altri libertini*: first of all, the Veronesi generation is not marginalised from society, and its independence from the adult world has to be seen as a choice, rather than a necessity or a constraint. Furthermore, these two generations are also different in class and regional belongings, as Veronesi's characters come from middle-class families who live in an urban and metropolitan environment such as Rome. Differences notwithstanding, I suggest that the same strategy of 'delaying of age' also characterises the characters in Veronesi's text. In this section, I aim to analyse *Gli sfiorati* by pointing out the importance peer relationships assume in the process of identification of the male protagonist – Mète – and, more generally, of the young generation he represents. I will look at the relationship between Mète and his friend Damiano, and at how this male homosocial bond – in Sedgwick's words – seems to affect gender relations within the generational group.⁴²

In *Gli sfiorati*, adult figures are, as in *Altri libertini*, mostly absent from the narration and from young people's lives; nevertheless, I argue that Veronesi develops new models of identity, which differ from the Tondelli generation's 'Regime of the Brother' structure. If we consider Mète's experience as symbolic of the young generation to which he belongs, it can be argued that relations between peers are no longer based on shared generational experiences, but become more intimate and individualised. Despite enjoying the same interests,

⁴² See Sedgwick, *Between Men*.

this young generation gives more importance to individual and personal experience: the negotiation of male identity within the generational group becomes, therefore, a matter of establishing and maintaining powerful homosocial bonds. In this sense, the relationship between Mète and his best friend Damiano, central to my analysis, can be read as a new form of identity negotiation – another incarnation of the ‘delaying of age’ strategy.

While in *Altri libertini* adult figures were totally absent, in *Gli sfiorati* they occupy a more important, yet still peripheral place. Veronesi introduces Mète’s father at the very beginning of the novel: while he only appears briefly, his presence is very important. The father is a very powerful character, who has a role to play in Mète’s life, and I will demonstrate that the relationship between father and son could be read as a variation of the traditional Oedipus complex. In one of the book’s first scenes Mète is attending his father’s second wedding, at which he will marry his long-time lover Virna, a few months after the death of Mète’s mother. Soon after the ceremony, while waiting for the reception to take place, Mète decides to take a sauna when his father suddenly joins in, wanting to ask his son to take care of Belinda – Mète’s seventeen-year-old half-sister – during his one-week honeymoon. Veronesi structures the dialogue between father and son as a boxing match, comprising three rounds. This brief chapter is in fact called ‘Genomachia in tre riprese’, a title which highlights the ‘fighting’ nature of the two men’s conversation.⁴³ The father is emblematically described in opposition to the serious-minded Mète as embodying ‘una irrefrenabile e candida leggerezza, come di qualcuno che non abbia mai conosciuto il dolore, né il rimpianto, né la responsabilità’.⁴⁴

In the presence of his father, Mète is overcome by strong emotions: the young man is unsure of his feelings – ‘[a]mava suo padre? Lo odiava?’ (p. 46) – and I would suggest that these love/hate feelings are symptomatic of the Oedipal situation in which the two characters are involved. Despite being usually located in early childhood, the Oedipus complex, as Young suggests, ‘may rise again when one or the other parent dies’.⁴⁵ This is precisely the case in Veronesi’s novel, as Mète’s mother’s recent death and her replacement, in

⁴³ The word *genomachia* comes from the Greek *genos* (family), and *machia* (conflict). In this sense, I would argue that Veronesi might have used it to underline a conflict taking place within the same family.

⁴⁴ Veronesi, *Gli sfiorati*, p. 41.

⁴⁵ Robert M. Young, *Oedipus Complex* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2001), p. 6.

the young man's eyes, with Virna may be considered as the very cause of Mète's hatred towards his father and stepmother, and the strong defence of his mother's memory. As originally theorised by Freud, the Oedipus complex involves a love triangle within the family group, which consists of mother, father, and son. The male child, in love with his mother, wishes to kill his father: the sense of guilt provoked by his incestuous desire makes him fear what is called a 'castration complex', which is interpreted by the boy as retaliation for his deviant attraction to the mother. The Oedipus complex reproduced in *Gli sfiorati* is more complicated, involving more characters and extending outside the nuclear family.

Veronesi reworks three Oedipal elements in his text: incestuous desire; phantasies of castration; and a murderous instinct towards the father figure. However, the Oedipus complex in *Gli sfiorati* is atypically reconfigured, as the author deals with these three elements to create complex scenarios and new configurations. The incestuous desire – originally the son's sexual attraction to his mother – is transferred here onto Belinda. Mète is aware of the 'deviant' nature of his sexual desire for his half-sister, and the whole novel gravitates around the protagonist's – in the end failing – resistance to her. The castration complex – traditionally associated with the son's sense of guilt – appears twice in the novel: firstly, it is the way in which Mète expresses a murderous instinct towards his father; secondly, it becomes a real threat, menacing the strong homosocial bond between Mète and his friend Damiano. Due to the complexity of the Oedipal configurations in this novel, I will carefully make reference to the text and its narrative units, aiming to disentangle this convoluted plot and clarify the way in which the processes of dis/identification from adult society and identification within the peer group take place.

The sauna scene, when Mète and his father are seen 'heatedly' discussing Belinda's future, is fundamentally constructed following an Oedipal structure: the son, Mète, hates his father and wishes he could metaphorically kill him. The reason for his passionate hatred is double: it is resentment at the father's remarriage, and it comes from the shock he gets at the thought of spending a whole week alone with Belinda. The protagonist, in fact, reproaches the father for not having waited longer before marrying Virna – 'C'è che la mamma è morta solo sei mesi fa, ecco che c'è. Almeno la festa mascherata ve

la potevate risparmiare',⁴⁶ and more generally for the lack of responsibility he demonstrates: '[n]essuno l'aveva mai inchiodato alle sue responsabilità, e fatalmente s'era convinto di non averne affatto. Questo era suo padre, pensò Mète' (p. 45). Mète's comment is important from an inter-generational point of view, as it underlines what can be considered as almost a swap in roles between father and son. Furthermore, it also highlights an aspect of the protagonist's generation, or what I would define a preliminary resistance to generational integration. This idea will become clearer later in this section, but, for clarity's sake, I prefer to deal with the difficult relationship between Mète and his generational peer group after this analysis of the Oedipus complex.

Furthermore, when the father informs Mète about his decision to leave Belinda in his care for a week, the young man's reaction explicitly conveys his sense of terror and despair – feelings that are caused by his awareness of the potential danger of this situation. The sequence is an escalation of horror and pain for the protagonist – 'L'argomento Belinda, si vedeva, era una tagliola micidiale per Mète, un colpo basso'; 'c'era un pungiglione nero, in quelle parole, che affondava nelle carni nude di Mète, dritto nel cuore, paralizzandolo completamente' (pp. 54–5) – and closes with the young man fainting, due to the increased temperature in the sauna, but, as the narrator suggests, also as a final surrender to the inevitability of the situation. Veronesi does not disclose in this passage the reason for Mète's behaviour, but a few pages later it is clear that the explanation lies in Mète's sexual attraction to, and desire for, his half-sister: at the wedding reception, in fact, he decides to 'court' other women in order to 'distrarli altrove allora, questi sensi impuri' (p. 62). As the narrator notices:

troppo spesso si dimentica che dentro a qualsiasi uomo che si aggiri famelico in cerca di donne alberga una lacerante, tormentosa e straziante disperazione, all'origine della quale si trova sempre un'altra donna interessata ad altro, ignara o inconsapevole che sia. (p. 63)

The thought of having to live with Belinda under the same roof and the emotional fatigue caused by his father's marriage ceremony make Mète wish to figuratively kill his father. In the sauna, the young man repeatedly attempts to

⁴⁶ Veronesi, *Gli sfiorati*, p. 43. Mète defines his father's wedding ceremony as a 'festa mascherata', because the theme of the event is the 1970s, when Virna and Mète's father first decided to get married.

weaken his father by adding water to increase the temperature of the room: '[n]otando il padre ormai rosso in viso e in debito di ossigeno, Mète rovesciò una mestolata d'acqua nel braciere, per indebolirlo'; 'Mète lo guardò: strizzava gli occhi e resisteva al calore a fatica, poteva costargli un collasso' (p. 47); '[b]randendo il mestolo, Mète aveva fulmineamente rovesciato altra acqua sulle pietre ardenti. Doveva assolutamente por fine a quella disperata resistenza' (p. 49). I would read this scene in terms of an Oedipal rivalry between son and father, but what I consider most interesting here – apart from the evident swap of roles between father and son – is the fact that the desire to kill the father is also expressed through a re-elaboration of those 'phantasies of castration' that, for Freud, were central retaliatory acts towards the 'guilty' son. In fact, while sitting next to his father in the sauna, Mète 'non poté fare a meno di guardare il suo [his father's] sesso rosa, che gli faceva capolino tra le cosce: da un semplice sbaglio nel manovrarlo, dunque, era nato lui? A Mète venne voglia di strizzarglielo' (p. 47).

As I have already suggested at the beginning of this section on the Veronesi generation, the author's re-elaboration of the castration complex as theorised by Freud is twofold: it develops in the relationship that the protagonist establishes with his father – as shown in the passage quoted above – and it plays a fundamental role in the homosocial bond between Mète and his friend Damiano. Before analysing this second representation of the castration complex, however, I would like to examine more closely the value of the male homosocial bond in *Gli sfiorati*. According to Sedgwick, male homosocial desire is frequently shaped as an erotic triangle, in which the bonds between two men powerfully regulate their relationship with the woman they both desire. By drawing on the configuration of the erotic triangle as theorised by Girard in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Sedgwick extends this social mechanism to include more generally the relations of power between genders, arguing that 'in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power'.⁴⁷ Relying on Heidi Hartmann's definition of patriarchy as based on 'relationships between men', Sedgwick therefore underlines how 'the power relationships between men and women appear to be

⁴⁷ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 25.

dependent on the power relationships between men and men', so that on a broader scale 'social structures are congruent with the male-male-female erotic triangles', as theorised by Girard (Sedgwick, p. 25).

In *Gli sfiorati*, Veronesi structures the relationship between Mète, Damiano, and Belinda as an erotic triangle: the two friends are both sexually attracted to Belinda and compete for her attention. The homosocial bond between the two young men is based on a close friendship and it is never structured as open rivalry: Damiano, in fact, is not aware of Mète's desire for Belinda and therefore he does not hide his own feelings from Mète. Mète, in turn, does not make explicit his sexual attraction to his half-sister. If, on an individual level, the erotic triangle shapes the power relationships between Veronesi's characters, I would suggest that, on a broader level, it becomes a social configuration that affects power relationships between genders within the generational group. A closer analysis of the novel will clarify my argument. Interestingly, Veronesi describes Damiano – an orphan child who met Mète at the religious boarding school they both attended – as having a natural talent, 'che gli consentiva di approfondire ben oltre la media la propria conoscenza carnale dell'altro sesso'.⁴⁸ Having built up 'il suo piccolo harem di Uri dal lunedì libero, estetiste e parrucchiere e commesse di Benetton dalla sensualità inossidabile' (p. 100), Damiano is also willing to help his friend Mète in his search for women who, in Mète's eyes, can 'replace' Belinda. The male homosocial bond between the two friends is, therefore, consolidated by a shared interest in women that, as I am about to show, is further reinforced by them 'sharing' the same woman.

A precise episode in the middle of the novel illustrates well, in my opinion, the role of the male homosocial bond in regulating power relationships between genders within the generational group. In their usual nights spent together in bars and nightclubs, Mète and Damiano have often seen a beautiful and mysterious girl – always in the company of a different man – whose enigmatic look, accentuated by her being cross-eyed, attracts Mète. It is during a party at the nightclub 'Antenna', where Mète arrives in search of Belinda, that Damiano 'offers' this girl, Beatrice, to Mète. As the narrator says:

⁴⁸ Veronesi, *Gli sfiorati*, pp. 98–99.

Non è passato molto tempo, del resto, da quando Mète ha confidato a Damiano la propria ammirazione per la ragazza strabica [...]. E Damiano [...] quella ragazza è riuscito a intercettarla: l'ha conosciuta (inutile spiegare *come*, tanto queste cose non si imparano), pensando subito di offrirla in dono al suo amico, oppure, solo se Mète avesse continuato a non farsi mai trovare, [...] approfondire lui stesso la conoscenza. Ma ora è felice di spingerli l'uno verso l'altra, sinceramente, perché Damiano è fatto così, non solo ama i passatempo carnali per sé, li desidera per tutti. (pp. 274–75)

Beatrice is seen as a gift that Damiano offers to Mète, in a way that suggests she is devoid of any will and desire. This objectification of the female body and denial of female subjectivity is further reinforced by the mutual exchange of women between the two friends: while Mète is busy chatting with Beatrice in the nightclub, Damiano meets Belinda and this encounter provokes Mète's jealousy. The male homosocial bond is in danger and only the ready intervention of Belinda's boyfriend, Dinamo, avoids a possible dramatic rupture between the two friends.⁴⁹ I will refer here to the text to illustrate this point and to show how Mète and Damiano also treat Belinda as an object. Having spotted Damiano and Belinda together, 'chissà da quanto tempo, a ridere, a toccarsi, a dirsi negli orecchi chissà cosa' (p. 278), Mète is consumed by jealousy and starts imagining a possible scenario of Belinda and Damiano as a happy couple:

l'immaginazione di Mète era un'altra telecamera ancora, che rovistava nel passato prossimo e anche nel futuro, mostrandogli altre immagini acuminate, ma normali, in fondo, naturali, di lei e lui che fanno conoscenza, si danno appuntamento, vanno al mare insieme. (p. 278)

When Dinamo arrives to take Belinda away with him, the girl silently obeys and follows her boyfriend, interrupting the complicity with Damiano. Desired by Mète and Damiano, Belinda follows the only man who does not care for her:

[s]ullo schermo Dinamo ripeteva proprio adesso il suo cenno di padrone, e lei dovette vederlo, perché subito si mosse per salutare. [...] Mète e Damiano la videro scivolare dietro a Dinamo, e regalargli una canina ubbidienza. Lo seguì tra la folla senza che lui nemmeno si occupasse di lei. (p. 279)

⁴⁹ The male homosocial bond between Mète and Damiano appears to be based on a mutual attraction to, as well as a mutual exclusion of, Belinda as potentially dangerous for their friendship. By comparing the girl's body to 'una bomba', the narrator reports Damiano's first thoughts after having seen Belinda for the first time: "Se la Russia e l'America hanno l'atomica, noi abbiamo lei", disse Damiano di Belinda quando la vide, e Mète evitò di presentargliela' (p. 31).

The depiction of Belinda and Beatrice as submissive towards their male partners, and as objects of exchange for the sake of the male homosocial bond, alludes, in my opinion, to a broader generational attitude towards gender roles in which male bonding is seen as powerfully regulating female desire.

Another passage from the novel will illustrate in greater detail how the male homosocial bond between Mète and Damiano is dependent on the triangular relationship that the two young men have established with Belinda. The morning after the nightclub episode discussed above, Damiano calls Mète apparently to encourage him to arrange a date with Beatrice, but, in reality, hoping to speak with Belinda. The lively discussion between the two men, soon transformed into an argument, causes a rupture in their friendship and, once again, gives evidence of an implicit female submission to male desire. As he suspects his friend is hiding the real purpose of his call, Mète attacks him:

‘Vorresti che io mi sdebitassi dandoti mia sorella? È questo il ragionamento? Vorresti fare un baratto? Vuoi che t’inviti a casa quando c’è anche lei, così che tu possa *casualmente* incontrarla, oppure preferisci che te la faccia trovare direttamente sola, magari dopo averle parlato di te, tanto per spianarti un po’ la strada? Dimmelo...’ [...] ‘Solo che purtroppo Belinda non è una figurina, e non appartiene a me, sai, non posso proprio scambiarla, tanto più che domani tornerà a casa sua.’ [...] ‘Non c’è nulla di male se ti piace Belinda, è bella... Solo, vorrei che tu avessi il buongusto di non chiedermi di farvi da sensale, magari offrendomi in cambio una bella ricompensa... Per quanto mi riguarda puoi fare il cascamoto con chi ti pare, telefonare a Belinda, alla strabica, a tutte e due insieme, se ti fa piacere. Però, per cortesia, non venirlo a dire a me...’ (p. 284)

The objectification of women and of the female body is also reinforced by the fact that Damiano will actually ‘share’ Beatrice with Mète, by starting a sexual relationship with her. In the last few pages of the novel events come quickly to an end and the Oedipal dynamic set up at the very beginning eventually develops.

As I have already argued, in *Gli sfiorati* Veronesi reworks three Oedipal elements: rivalry between son and father, incestuous desire (for the sister), and phantasies of castration. We have seen that the problematic relationship between Mète and his father is characterised by the son’s desire to metaphorically kill and ‘castrate’ him – a desire that is caused by the father’s apparent lack of responsibility, his second marriage, and the recent death of Mète’s mother. Phantasies of castration return then as a central element in the

male homosocial bond between Mète and Damiano: other than a phantasy, castration becomes a real threat in retaliation for the incest taking place and the untying of the male homosocial bond. The action moves along two parallel lines: on the one hand, there is Mète's final surrender to his sexual desire for Belinda; on the other hand, there is Damiano's betrayal of Mète's trust and his seduction of Beatrice. I will provide a close textual analysis of these two narrative episodes, and consequently focus on the process of 'delaying of age' as it becomes evident for Mète's generation.

It is in a brief chapter entitled 'Contagio' that the central event around which *Gli sfiorati* gravitates – Mète's 'deviant' sexual attraction for his half-sister – eventually becomes a reality. After having come back from a night spent with Beatrice, Mète realises that he cannot forget Belinda, and that he has to fulfil his desire to have sex with her. Again, the young woman's desire is not taken into account: hers is an implicit submission to a male sexual need, and her subjectivity is denied and foreclosed. Mète is aware of his one-way desire, and, in fact, he seems also to question the nature of the sexual act with Belinda:

Mio Dio, pensò Mète, le sto usando violenza... [...] Ma no, il caldo corpo di lei s'inarcava per accoglierlo, le gambe gli si serravano sulla schiena per trattenerlo, non era violenza. Eppure lo era [...] perché ormai così come l'aveva ottenuta, a cavallo di un piccolo istante Mète aveva perduto l'*incoscienza*. E allora tornava a temere, a vedere udire interrogarsi. (p. 326, emphasis added)⁵⁰

Love and violence are, thus, inextricably linked in this scene, which, despite involving two persons, is actually all about Mète and his facing the '*kairòs* l'attimo in cui si decide tutto, passato il quale il corso degli eventi diviene irrevocabile' (p. 322). The young man has to choose between being Belinda's brother or lover: 'avrebbe ancora potuto essere fratello di Belinda [...]. Avrebbe ancora potuto *considerarla una persona*, Belinda, non già un'istigazione che gli mozzava il respiro e gli infiammava le vene del collo... [...] Ecco, non più' (pp. 322–23, emphasis added). By having sex with Belinda, Mète betrays the male homosocial bond that was implicitly based on a mutual respect of his and

⁵⁰ I will come back to the use of the term 'incoscienza' here in this passage, because, I would suggest, it could help us to better understand the role of Mète as a member of his generational group. As I am about to demonstrate, I argue that Mète's defence of his being different from his peers, of not sharing the same 'delaying of age' attitude towards life, is in reality only a masquerade, which crumbles and reveals the truth in the sexual act with Belinda.

Damiano's shared desire of Belinda and that was already unstable and menaced by Damiano's flirting with Belinda at the nightclub.

Damiano's seduction of Beatrice might be interpreted as a further step in the destruction of the homosocial bond; however, it ends up being the opportunity for a final reconciliation and, more importantly, as atonement for Mète's own sins (the incest). As I have already pointed out, 'phantasies of castration' are also central in the homosocial bond: however, they are no longer phantasies, but the threat becomes real and the victim is, in this case, Damiano. The young man, in fact, dates Beatrice, but is unaware of how dangerous this relationship and, more specifically, Beatrice could be. Mète identifies the first signals of Beatrice's maniac personality in a sample of writing he happens to analyse, where he finds 'i tre ricci della mitomania' (p. 298). This first impression keeps worrying Mète during his date with Beatrice, especially his increasing fear ('Mète avvertì un brivido di paura, il secco desiderio di fuggire via') and 'la netta impressione che Beatrice Plana fosse pazza' (pp. 300–301). It is only when Beatrice dates Damiano that her personality disorder becomes a concrete danger: the narrator reveals – almost unexpectedly – that Damiano is in hospital after an accident. Mète himself hears of the news from a television appeal for people to donate blood and, once in the hospital, he understands the shocking reality: Damiano has been castrated by Beatrice. Mète interprets this event as the only possible way of redemption, of saving himself by donating his blood to Damiano.

I would like to conclude my analysis of the Oedipal triangle and the male homosocial bond as it develops in *Gli sfiorati*, by coming back to Freud's original theorisation of these two concepts. According to Freud, the male child's desire for his mother provokes a consequent hatred for the father and the fear of castration as punishment for his incestuous desire. In this section, I have applied this psychoanalytic model to the triangular relationship between Mète, Belinda, and their father: the father, furthermore, has also been replaced by Damiano, Mète's closest friend. What is most interesting, in my opinion, is the 'atypical' development of this relational model: if castration is seen as a punishment for incest, then Mète, not Damiano, should have been the one who is castrated. The chapter in which the narrator reveals Damiano's accident is tellingly entitled 'C'era rimasto un innocente', thus opposing an innocent Damiano to a guilty Mète. I would suggest that the epilogue to the novel sheds

some light on this complex Oedipal knot. In the last few pages, in fact, the reader gets to know that Mète moved to the Philippines, where he is working as a missionary: the narrator does not disclose the role of Mète in the mission. However, we know from one of Veronesi's most recent novels, *XY*, that Mète has become Don Ermete, and he is the priest of the small village of San Giuda in northern Italy.⁵¹ In the light of my argument regarding the Oedipus complex, I would therefore argue that castration as punishment for incestuous desire becomes a central element in Mète's final coming of age. His is an intentional, religious 'castration', which is consciously perpetrated and imposed by Mète himself, as a form of atonement. Mète's final coming of age is therefore an atypical one: he becomes part of adult society, but always keeps his distance which – as I have so far shown and I am about to discuss in greater detail – has been a characteristic element of his being part of his generational group.

After having analysed *Gli sfiorati* from the perspective of the three main characters – Mète, Belinda, and Damiano – and their relationships, I will now widen my focus to situate my analysis within the generational group these characters belong to. As the title of the novel suggests, the generational dimension is a fundamental component of the narration. By observing the lives of his characters, Veronesi gives an account of a young generation that was about – at least chronologically – to come of age at the end of the eighties. Described as *sfiorati*, these young men and women live detached from the society which surrounds them. Their life is barely touched (*sfiorata*) by external events, and the only important things are nights out, sex, and drugs. Their values and interests mark them as members of their generational group and, consequently, prevent any contact with the older (adult) generation. By no longer aiming to follow in the footsteps of the adult generation, they decide to adopt that 'delaying of age' that we have already seen as the lens through which we can read the development of the coming of age narrative in the texts under analysis.

Mète plays a central, yet thwarted, role in his generational group: in fact, I will show how the young man is constantly torn between a traditional coming of age and his generation's 'delaying of age'. One of the central characteristics of Mète, as the reader gets to know from the narration, is that he has spent

⁵¹ Veronesi, *XY*.

most of his young life studying and specialising in graphology. His job as a graphologist is in itself of relevance to my discourse on the acquisition of identity and coming of age, because it allows Mète to deeply understand other people's identities, yet makes his own identity more impenetrable. Apparently, it seems that the protagonist is trying his best to follow the steps of a traditional coming of age: he has a job and considers himself as an adult, limiting the contact with his own peer group to his relationship with his friend Damiano. To use one of the many literary references in the text, Mète sees himself as “giovine di anni e rugoso in sembiante”, come Foscolo scrisse di se stesso,⁵² with ‘un corpo che la giovinezza poteva solo sfiorare’ (p. 315). However, I would suggest that the encounter with Belinda – together with the influence the girl has on her half-brother – makes Mète's seriousness and apparent maturity falter. I would argue, in fact, that Belinda symbolically represents the very essence of a young generation to which all the characters of *Gli sfiorati* belong. Mète's attempt to grow up and detach himself from his generation is doomed to failure; his destiny seems to be that of his generation: delaying his coming of age. I will explain more clearly now how this inclusion of Mète within his peer group actually develops in the text, and what this young generation looks like.

By studying other people through graphology, Mète has the opportunity to analyse Belinda's handwriting and he notices the presence of a new graphological sign he has recently discovered and termed ‘*schiumevolezza*’ (pp. 149–55).⁵³ This *schiumevolezza* is the very characteristic of *Gli sfiorati*'s generation and it is important to follow how the protagonist defines it, as I would argue that the description of this concept applies to my own theorisation of the ‘delaying of age’ strategy. In a conversation with Padre Mayer, a leading graphologist who supervises Mète's work, the young man has to fiercely defend his thesis of a new sign, the symbol of a possible anthropological mutation which can be found only ‘in calligrafie di ragazzi al di sotto dei vent'anni, o appena più grandi’ (p. 151). Mète recognises that Padre Meyer

ha vissuto la sua intera formazione in un periodo nel quale, tanto per fare un esempio, nessuno si sognava che la terra potesse saltare in aria, così, bum,

⁵² Veronesi, *Gli sfiorati*, p. 96.

⁵³ The term *schiumevolezza* might be translated as ‘foamy’ or ‘frothy’. It is used in order to underline this younger generation's ability to adapt to recurring changes within society. They can easily change shape/mood as foam.

da un giorno all'altro [...] ha conosciuto i tempi in cui le sorti dell'umanità erano ancora nelle mani di Dio'. (p. 152)

While talking to the Padre Mayer, Mète compares a traditional process of coming of age to that of his generation, born in 'questo mondo che è cambiato così profondamente, che è diventato di colpo così precario, traballante' and in which, Mète argues, young people have developed a new strategy to survive life's chaos: 'quell'affogare continuamente nell'attimo presente, quello spasmodico affidarsi all'impulso di un istante fino a farsi contenere del tutto, ma veramente, padre, del tutto nell'istante che lo ha generato'. This new sign, a symbol of a new generation, was born as a consequence of the world in which these people live, 'da quando sappiamo tutti che ogni istante potrebbe anche essere, teoricamente, l'ultimo' (p. 154). The only structure to rule the chaos is the *schiumevolezza* – the 'delaying of age' in my own words – 'il modo che queste persone hanno di abbandonarsi, di continuo, alla vita' (p. 155).

Despite keeping apart from his generation, Mète appears to be completely dependent upon his friend Damiano: his dependence is his strategy to avoid any contact with Belinda. As I have already argued when analysing the homosocial bond between Mète and Damiano, male friendship is seen as the only possible way to reject any incestuous desire and, consequently, deny his self: 'Mète fuggiva il proprio intimo, affidandosi all'altrui' (p. 137). The young man's identity is split into two parts: while smoking drugs with Belinda, he realises that he can be that brother the girl needs by her side; however, when the effect of drugs vanishes, he is again 'l'altro Mète, quello che sapeva solo studiare, giudicare, e tormentarsi nelle passioni contro natura' (p. 192). As I have already suggested, I would argue that it is in the very moment in which Mète renounces his different being – his seriousness and 'grown-up' attitude – that he actually becomes involved in his generational group. In other words, the protagonist's inclusion within the peer group can be interpreted as a contagion (the chapter is entitled 'Contagio'), as an illness that Mète contracts from Belinda in their sexual act. This illness is that of the 'incoscienza', that recklessness irresponsibility which is the very essence of the Veronesi generation. Having obtained this *incoscienza* by accomplishing his sexual desire, he nonetheless immediately loses it again: "ormai, così come l'aveva ottenuta, a cavallo di un piccolo istante Mète aveva perduto l'incoscienza. E

allora tornava a temere, a vedere udire interrogarsi' (p. 326). It is interesting to see how the narrator describes the contagion scene:

ormai Mète aveva disteso la mano verso di lei, alla cieca, e aveva trovato carne, e la stava accarezzando, dolcemente, irrevocabilmente la carne liscia di Belinda [...]. Se la volontà di Mète era la carne non c'era il posto per il verbo, e dopo il silenzio doveva mutuare con Belinda anche l'incoscienza, l'ignoranza, la vita vissuta come una successione fittissima di botte in testa che non lasciano mai il tempo di tornare in sé, l'ultima delle quali li aveva storditi insieme su quel letto dove avrebbero potuto *fare*, ma non sapere quel che facevano... [...] Lei si lasciava accarezzare, lo ricambiava addirittura. Perché? Mète non lo sapeva, ma non aveva più importanza [...]. Fuggevolezza, schiumevolezza, cosa gli importava più del nome, adesso che c'era precipitato dentro? S'era ingobbato su centinaia di libri, per anni, s'era cavato gli occhi su migliaia di calligrafie e mai, studiandolo, aveva avvicinato quel mistero come adesso che cessava di vederlo, e ne diveniva parte lui stesso. (pp. 323–24)

By untying the homosocial bond with Damiano and making love to Belinda, Mète surrenders to 'l'incoscienza, l'ignoranza' that characterises his generation, and disowns his self, what he has always believed himself to be. However, as I have already argued, he also realises his being different and his necessity to follow another path to maturity:

Belinda invece rimaneva invulnerabile, perché lei sapeva trattenersi indefinitamente nel limbo da cui Mète era caduto giù. [...] Detestava la vita, e preferiva di gran lunga farsene tramortire piuttosto che fermarsi un secondo solo a guardarla [...]. Oh, anche lui voleva detestare la vita... solo che poi non era capace di astrarsene come lei, si era scelleratamente lasciato tentare ma non gli riusciva, e d'altra parte nemmeno di detestare la vita era capace [...] No, Mète *amava*, era diverso, e il sentimento che nutriva per Belinda era puro, non poteva appagarsi così, nell'uso [...]. Aveva bisogno della parola, lui, delle ragioni, doveva sapere *perché*. [...] Bisognava trovarsi, prima, riconoscersi, non era quello il modo... (pp. 326–28)

In conclusion, I would argue that, in *Gli sfiorati*, Veronesi gives a vivid depiction of the way in which a generation of young men and women adapt to changes in society: their *schiumevolezza* – ability to adapt to uncertain situations – is a strategy to delay their coming of age, their becoming an adult in a society in which being an adult has lost its traditional value. The protagonist – with his difficult and in the end impossible integration within his peer group – in my opinion symbolises the traditional coming of age process, which is starkly in contrast with the new delaying of age strategy. Both processes of acquisition of identity, however, are deemed impossible for Mète, suggesting that despite the crisis of traditional coming of age, there is still a craving for role models for

young people to follow. Mète is trapped in a ceaseless struggle between coming of age and his generation's 'delaying of age': unable to be either one of the *sfiorati* or a member of adult society, he has to build up his parallel process of coming of age, to seek an institutional structure (the Church) that has managed to maintain its own variant of the traditional model of coming of age.

The Narcissistic Generation in Culicchia's *Brucia la città*

The last novel analysed in this chapter – Culicchia's *Brucia la città* – represents the last step in a development of the coming of age narrative which stretches over almost four decades. Published by Mondadori in 2009, Culicchia's text can be read as an insight into Italian contemporary society, through the perspective of a generation of young upper-class people in Turin. More specifically, the story is told by a first person narrator, Iaio, the protagonist of the novel: the reader becomes involved in this character and his group of male friends' lives, following them in an escalation of surreal situations and nightmare-like episodes. Despite exaggeration being a central element of this narrative, the protagonist/narrator's tone is not moralistic or judgemental: as readers, we are left with the doubt that these situations could actually happen. From a stylistic and thematic point of view, *Brucia la città* reminds us of an already (in)famous society, the American society of the 1980s–1990s described by Bret Easton Ellis in his novels, from *Less than Zero* (1985) to *American Psycho* (1991). I would argue that there are two important points of connection between Culicchia and the American author: firstly, Culicchia has worked as a translator into Italian of Ellis's oeuvre, and his working closely with Ellis and his narrative is a factor that should not be underestimated.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the influence of the American writer on Culicchia is only the apex of a long-standing fascination that American culture and society have held for generations of Italians, starting from the 'economic miracle'.

What Culicchia is certainly trying to do in *Brucia la città* is to narrate a change in society: by describing a precise time – the present – and place – Turin – he uses the narrative mechanism of the chronotope to refer more broadly to a national issue. In fact, in an interview posted on the Rai

⁵⁴ Culicchia translated Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, *Lunar Park*, and *Imperial Bedrooms* for the Einaudi publishing house.

Educational website, the writer admits that his characters can be read as a synecdoche of an Italian younger generation:

i ragazzi, i trentenni di *Brucia la città* fanno ormai una vita molto simile a quella dei loro coetanei non solo milanesi o romani, ma alla vita che fanno anche i loro coetanei in città molto più piccole, nella provincia. [...] Il tentativo da parte mia era quello di raccontare un po', come si dice, lo spirito del tempo'.⁵⁵

If time and place are the narrative tropes through which Culicchia tells the story of a whole country, then the spirit of the time is the central element that he aims to reproduce in *Brucia la città*. This *zeitgeist* (spirit of the time) is, I would argue, both a chronological and a biographical factor, formed by two strictly intertwined elements: the contemporary society in which the author himself lives, and the younger generation. Like the other two narrative texts analysed in this chapter, *Brucia la città* also narrates a change within Italian society that affects, overall, young people. In Tondelli's *Altri libertini*, youth's increasing independence from family and social institutions resulted in young people's inclusion and recognition within the generational peer group. In Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati*, social changes provoked a disillusionment and total detachment from (adult) society, and an individualised, yet shared within the generation, response as *schiumevolezza*. In Culicchia's *Brucia la città*, the writer explains this change – 'il cambiamento' – as 'uniformità degli stili di vita, modelli culturali che si sovrappongono e che fanno piazza pulita dell'esistente, di quello che era "il prima"'. The Culicchia generation, which I am about to analyse in greater detail, is therefore a generation which has to fit within a completely changed country, 'un Paese che vive al di sopra delle proprie possibilità, [...] che ha smarrito per strada una serie di cose e che improvvisamente si ritrova a vivere una realtà che molte volte, come non definire grottesca' ('Una città che brucia'). In my analysis of *Gli sfiorati* I defined the generation depicted by Veronesi with the term *schiumevolezza*, highlighting these young people's ability to adapt to life's uncertain conditions, without assuming responsibilities but by only being *sfiorati* by events. In *Brucia la città*, I would argue that Culicchia offers us a picture of what the Veronesi generation has become almost two decades later. The age gap between Belinda (as

⁵⁵ Interview with Giuseppe Culicchia, 'Una città che brucia', Rai Educational website <<http://www.scrittoreperunanno.rai.it/scrittori.asp?videoid=988¤tId=119>> [accessed 16 April 2012].

representative of the '*sfiorati*') and Iaio, the protagonist of the Culicchia generation, is small, leading me to argue that the two novels could follow the same generational group over the years. I am not suggesting that Culicchia makes conscious references to Veronesi's work in his novel, but in the following analysis I wish to highlight the similarities between the two texts in terms of the young protagonists' 'delaying of age' strategy, showing how the *schiumevolezza* – the Veronesi generation's characteristic – becomes, in the new millennium, a totally narcissistic behaviour.

At the very beginning of this chapter I proposed analysing three novels from three Italian contemporary authors who engage with the coming of age narrative. Despite these texts dealing with very diverse historical and social contexts, I have been attempting to find a shared element, identifying it in the generational group which, I would argue, becomes the protagonist of this specific development of the coming of age novel. I would suggest that Culicchia's personal take on the coming of age narrative in *Brucia la città* reproduces a pattern that I have already highlighted in the two previous texts: a conscious detachment from society as the consequence of a lack of valid adult role models in the process of growing up. Therefore, I will firstly focus on the relationship between the younger generation and adult figures in the text and then I will move on to an exploration of the very nature of the generational peer group as a male narcissistic group. My analysis will rely on both psychoanalytical perspectives and sociological work on narcissism: these will enable me to discuss the relationship between powerful male bonding and individualism as an increasingly widespread model of youthful socialisation.

In *Brucia la città*, the older generation is again mostly invisible and relegated to a few chapters of the book that can be read as digressions from the main narrative plot. In fact, it most often assumes the form of memories of the past and, I would argue, gives an insight into what can be defined as the cause of Iaio's and his girlfriend Allegra's traumatic and deviant process of coming of age. The reader, in fact, gets to know Iaio's and Allegra's parents through episodes of their childhood and adolescence, always told by Iaio, the protagonist and narrator of the novel. From a stylistic point of view, I would suggest that a similar narrative technique was adopted by Bret Easton Ellis in *Less than Zero* (1985), where digressions were used to recall the protagonist's

childhood and adolescence.⁵⁶ Iaio's and Allegra's parents are always shown as unaffectionate, only interested in money and appearance, and lacking any loving and caring feeling towards their children. When Iaio recalls his and his brother Ludwig's childhood, what springs to his mind are always painful moments: the time in which Ludwig started self-harming, in the face of the indifference of his father – a reporter from the USA – and his mother – obsessed with meditation⁵⁷ or when Iaio was introduced to his father's younger girlfriend, and the first time he tried cocaine, offered by his brother (p. 250). Similarly, Allegra is trapped between the rivalry of her divorced parents, whose affection is only expressed through expensive holidays and gifts. Despite not being interested in offering a role model to their children, I would argue that adults depicted in the text are, indeed, an example, albeit negative, to young people. In fact, adult figures establish a paradigm of behaviour which is inherited by the younger generation, and that I would call the narcissistic paradigm. In the following section, I will analyse the younger male generation as a narcissistic group, making reference to a model of socialisation already identified in the American society of the eighties. I will therefore highlight points of connection between the younger generation described in *Brucia la città* – contemporary Italian youth – and the American narcissistic society of the 1980s. I would suggest that such a comparison is made possible by the influence that American literature and culture have on Culicchia and his narrative, and, on a broader level, by the long-standing fascination that the American way of life has always held for Italian people and their culture.

While introducing this section on *Brucia la città*, I highlighted a connection between Culicchia and a certain type of American literature, mainly represented by Bret Easton Ellis's works. Despite the stylistic similarities already highlighted, I would argue that *Brucia la città* could be compared to Ellis's narrative for their main shared theme: the story of a younger generation whose aims and behaviours are not represented and accepted by the traditional social system, and, therefore, imposes itself as a new social reality. This new social order gives rise to a narcissistic attitude in all sectors of social and individual life: developed as the consequence of 'an age of diminishing

⁵⁶ See Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (London: Picador, 2010).

⁵⁷ Culicchia, *Brucia la città*, pp. 107–08.

expectations',⁵⁸ the narcissistic mode is, according to Christopher Lasch, the type of personality that, from the 1970s, has characterised American generations for the following decades.

The concept of narcissism as theorised by Freud and subsequently reworked by several scholars concerns the relationship between the individual and his own self. In *Narcissism: An Introduction* Freud makes reference to the general definition of narcissism as 'the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated',⁵⁹ thus establishing a connection between the ego and the narcissistic attitude. The difference between the two, however, lies in their different development within the individual's self: according to Bèla Grunberger, narcissism has an instinctual nature and 'is present at (and even before) birth, whereas the ego is a later acquisition'.⁶⁰ Being structured like an instinct, narcissism has a libidinal component, which is innate in the individual; the ego, on the contrary, goes through a long process of maturation that, I would suggest, might be compared to the coming of age process of the individual. A latent presence in every individual, the narcissistic component could become central in certain situations, affecting one's attitude (narcissistic attitude). For instance, if we link narcissism with the Oedipus complex we can acknowledge a resurgence of the narcissistic attitude as narcissistic omnipotence. As explained by Grunberger, in an Oedipal situation 'the child wants to do as his father, but, more important, to do *better* than him, to surpass him [...]. And when the child finally fulfils his Oedipal wish in his dreams, he will identify not with his father as he is, but with a *king* (narcissistic omnipotence)' (Grunberger, p. 106).

Despite its primary connection with the individual, narcissism can also be found in a broader context, affecting a whole generation. If for an individual the competition with the father triggers a 'narcissistic omnipotence' attitude, then I would argue that the same competitive relationship could be found between the younger and older generations. I have already highlighted that in Culicchia's *Brucia la città* adult and parental figures always provide a negative role model for young people, who follow their example regardless and reproduce their actions and behaviours. If, as suggested by Grunberger, in the Oedipus

⁵⁸ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*.

⁵⁹ Freud, *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, p. 73.

⁶⁰ Bèla Grunberger, *Narcissism: Psychoanalytic Essays* (New York: International Universities Press, 1979), p. 105.

complex the child follows in his father's footsteps – yet at the same time tries to do better than him – I would argue that, similarly, the younger generation depicted in *Brucia la città* reproduces behaviours and situations already experienced by the older generation (parents).

Having identified a relationship between the older and younger generations in terms of inheritance of role models, I will now analyse the behavioural and social features which characterise Culicchia's narcissistic group. One of the epigraphs at the beginning of *Brucia la città* is in this sense very appropriate, inasmuch as it gives the reader a rather precise depiction of the type of situations and characters at the centre of the novel. The passage from Alexis de Tocqueville warns readers about the dangers of democratic power and the problems it could cause to citizens. What is extraordinarily interesting about this passage is Tocqueville's clarity of thought that led him to imagine what people under a democratic regime might look like. Highly appropriate to the themes of Culicchia's work that I am identifying in this chapter, this quotation actually touches on several of the themes discussed in this chapter and, therefore, it is worth analysing closely.

For Tocqueville, democracies could incur the risk of subjugating people to shared trivial needs and desires, while making them value only their individual interests. In this kind of social and political regime, 'una folla sterminata di individui simili tra loro ed eguali [...] si danno incessantemente per procurarsi piccoli piaceri volgari'.⁶¹ The relationship between the individual and the society which surrounds him/her is limited to a close group – 'i suoi figli e i suoi amici più intimi' – leaving out people not directly involved in his/her own life: 'quanto alla vita dei suoi concittadini, egli è tra loro, ma non li vede; [...] egli non esiste che in se stesso e per se stesso e, se gli resta ancora una famiglia, possiamo almeno dire che non ha più una patria'. Centuries after Tocqueville's theorisation of democracy's dangers, the younger generation described by Culicchia seems to have reproduced all these major concerns and made them an integral part of its being. This generation, represented by Iaio and his close friends, is in fact homogenised in terms of taste, interests, and needs: the protagonist and his two friends Zombi and Boh are DJs who love the same kind of music, attend the same kind of parties based on cocaine and sex, wear

⁶¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, epigraph to *Brucia la città*, p.9.

clothes of the same brand, and have sex with the same type of girls. This homogenisation becomes grotesquely pervasive in the descriptive passages, which, with a technique often used by Culicchia, are cyclically repeated throughout the novel, creating an effect of alienation. Repetition and listing are two techniques which characterise Culicchia's narrative production and can be identified in other texts: here in *Brucia la città*, I would argue that their use is dependent upon and, at the same time, contributes to the creation of a generational context. Women do not play a significant role in the narcissistic group, other than being the object of male desire: their description, often repeated throughout the text, is stereotypical and, coming from Iaio and his friends' perspective, reveals a broader attempt to annul women's personalities in favour of a few minor physical details: '[f]rangia come quella tipa del *Grande Fratello*, [...] un tatuaggio tribale appena sopra il culo'.⁶²

Tocqueville's precise prediction of the future of democratic countries becomes even more appropriate and linked to the narcissistic generational group when he briefly describes the shortcomings of political power and its relation to its citizens: political democratic power, according to Tocqueville, loses any responsibility towards the process of maturation of its people; on the contrary, it deliberately renounces its formative role and, as a consequence, its 'paternal' authority:

Al di sopra di questa massa si erge un potere immenso e tutelare, che si fa carico solo di assicurare i divertimenti collettivi e di vegliare sulla sorte dei singoli. E' un potere assoluto, dettagliato, regolare, preveggenente e dolce. Rassomiglierebbe all'autorità paterna se, come questa, avesse lo scopo di preparare gli uomini all'età virile; ma, al contrario, non vuole altro che fissarli irrevocabilmente nell'infanzia; ama che i cittadini si divertano, dato che non pensano che a divertirsi. (p.9)

Tocqueville's analysis of the role of the state in a democratic regime seems, in the context of my discourse, very contemporary: the changes it highlights are those I have been underlining in my critical reading of the contemporary coming of age narrative and specifically concern the absence of role models and the consequent impossibility of becoming a 'man' in a traditional sense. This impossibility is not only caused by a lack of role models – as I have previously argued – but is further reinforced by the role of the state in its citizens' lives: a

⁶² Culicchia, *Brucia la città*, p. 21.

state that is only interested in supporting its people's amusement and that uses amusement as a medium to keep people amidst ignorance and to avoid them taking up their responsibilities. By using Tocqueville's thought as an introduction to his novel, I would argue that Culicchia clearly sets up the ideological context in which his text needs to be read: *Brucia la città* is not only a fictional narrative, but its depiction of an anthropological change – that of 'un Paese che vive al di sopra delle proprie possibilità', in Culicchia's words.

Culicchia's novel, I would argue, needs to be construed against the background of contemporary Italian society and to be read as an ironic, yet critical, representation of the serious changes which have shaped the Italian social and cultural scenario, specifically linked to the phenomenon of the *Berlusconizzazione*. The term *Berlusconizzazione*,

whereby certain values and discourses that are identified with an individual become increasingly naturalized to represent the interests of the entire society, is widely used by oppositional journalists to delineate the effects of the media magnate's alleged cultural hegemony over the country.⁶³

Stephen Gundle speaks of an 'anthropological revolution that was triggered by Berlusconi's television empire, with its spread of lowbrow mass culture and consumerist values'.⁶⁴ Introducing new television channels into Italian households, Berlusconi's commercial strategy not only contributed to the diffusion of 'a new, yet heavily anti-feminist representation of sexuality, with pretty showgirls and erotic films shown at night-time',⁶⁵ but also paved the way for a new form of political 'intervention', one in which passivity and disinterest became keywords. Television, as well as an unstable financial situation, social fragmentation, and a growing uncertainty, led, in fact, to an increasing 'detachment of wide strata of the population from politics, which began to be passively experienced on television rather than being articulated through the traditional channels of political aggregation'.⁶⁶ This shift from the political to the personal is at the centre of Culicchia's narrative account of Iaio and his peers,

⁶³ Daniele Albertazzi and Nina Rothenberg, 'Introduction: The Tide is not for Turning', in *Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition Under Berlusconi (2001–06)*, ed. by Daniele Albertazzi, et al. (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 1–16 (p. 8).

⁶⁴ See Stephen Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943–1991* (Durham, NC: Duke Press, 2000), p. 160. Quoted in Albertazzi and Rothenberg, *Introduction*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Albertazzi and Rothenberg, *Introduction*, p. 4.

⁶⁶ See Marco Tarchi, *L'Italia populista: Dal qualunquismo ai girotondi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003), p. 161. Quoted in Albertazzi and Rothenberg, *Introduction*, p. 5.

represented, as I argued, by their narcissistic behaviour. Contemporary Italy seems to have developed those dangers of democracy identified by Tocqueville and that find a vivid representation in this novel. By providing endless opportunities for amusement, contemporary society does not help young people in their transition towards adulthood but provides role models that make them retreat in a period of ceaseless childhood ('non vuole altro che fissarli irrevocabilmente nell'infanzia'). In this regard, I would argue that the delaying of age strategy represented in *Brucia la città* is a form of adaptation to a social milieu that, through television and its annihilation of people's power, has lost any point of reference and positive role model for young people. Through the delaying of age, individual differences are annulled in a narcissistic tendency which values only a hedonistic representation of identity.

This culture of narcissism has to be linked to individualism, which started to increase as a new powerful ideology in American society in the 1970s. In an uncertain world, with increasing unemployment, relational insecurity, and environmental preoccupation the strategy adopted by individuals was that of retreating in their small world, be it their nuclear families or the peer group. Lasch has argued that causes of the birth of what has been defined the 'me decade' (1970s) and the individualism which developed in the subsequent decades have to be traced in the steady decline of the family's importance in society, favouring, as a consequence other organisational systems: '[s]chools, peer groups, mass media, and the "helping professionals"' which 'had challenged parental authority'.⁶⁷ However, he has also distinguished between selfishness (pure individualism) and narcissism, the former being 'an "inner-directed" personality type', while the latter might be defined as 'a peer-oriented "other-directed" personality type' (Lasch, p. 238). In other words, the narcissistic type and, more generally, the narcissistic group rely on the other for the validation of their identity, and constantly live in a state of anxiety, mainly due to their worrying about the impression made on others. In contemporary Italian society, the male narcissistic group formed by Iaio and his friends seems to have inherited all these characteristics: these young men react to social changes and uncertainties by adopting a slacker way of life as a strategy to contrast any expectation society could have for their lives. If, as suggested by

⁶⁷ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 238.

Lasch, the narcissistic type becomes increasingly diffused in 'an age of diminishing expectations', I would suggest that it is indeed this lack of expectation for one's future which characterises the male narcissistic group in the novel. I would suggest that – as in Veronesi's novel – the protagonist relates to his male friends through what can be defined as a male homosocial bonding. Whereas in the previous chapter I have identified a homosocial bond based on the mutual attraction to, and mutual exclusion of, women – as theorised by Sedgwick – in *Brucia la città* the male homosocial bond between Iaio, Zombi, and Boh has a slightly different connotation. Women are still central in keeping the relationship between the three young men solid, but I would suggest that what really lies at the basis of their friendship is a latent competition, which makes them constantly – yet implicitly – fight for public approval. I will come back to the idea of public approval and success as fundamental for a healthy homosocial bond between the protagonists of this novel; however, I would like to briefly deal with the issue of the homosocial bond and the relationship with women.

In *Gli sfiorati*, Mète and Damiano's friendship was based on a forbidden desire for Mète's half-sister Belinda: theirs was a conscious recognition of an impossible and non-normative relationship which had to be kept away in order to guarantee a safe homosocial bonding. In *Brucia la città*, despite clearly objectifying women – as in *Gli sfiorati* – the male group takes a step further. For Iaio and his friends, women are only a way to satisfy their sexual needs: they have to be kept away, not only for the homosocial bond's sake, but also in order to assure these young men's individuality and narcissism. A few examples from the text should clarify the way in which women are treated in the text. In the chapter entitled 'Al Mare Nostrum', the three protagonists are waiting for their dinner to be served in a fish restaurant while discussing the best ways to avoid letting girls stay the night after having had sex. Here is an excerpt from their conversation:

'Come dicevo l'altra volta a Iaio, io le tipe che raccatto in consolle voglio bombarmele, mica dormirci. Se dopo che sei riuscito a bombartele riesci anche a rispedirle a casa fai filotto' ghigna. 'Non ci piove' concorda Boh. [...] 'Che merda che siamo!' 'Facciamo veramente schifo' digrigna Zombi. 'Vi ricordate quella volta a Riccione che dopo aver suonato ci siamo portati in albergo quelle cretine?' dico io. 'Sì, che poi è andata a finire che ci siamo

piazzati tutti e sei in una stanza e a un certo punto è diventata una roba tipo se tu mi fai scopare la tua io ti faccio scopare la mia' sghignazza Boh.⁶⁸

This is only one of a series of similar examples I could quote from the text, but I believe it to be rather interesting inasmuch as it explains one of the ways in which the homosocial bond between the three young men is kept alive.⁶⁹ Other than mutual exclusion, the mutual exchange of women is the real factor which consolidates their friendship. There is, however, an exception: Iaio, in fact, is supposed to have been in a stable relationship with Allegra for the past two years. The young woman's inexplicable absence – the whole story is loosely based on Iaio's search for Allegra – is, in my opinion, a symbol of the impossibility for the protagonist to actually engage with a normative idea of a relationship.

If 'exchanging' women is a fundamental component of the homosocial bond between Iaio and his friends, another important element is the implicit competition which is always present in their relationship. Being competitive could be counterproductive in friendship, because it could lead to the breaking up of the relationship: however, in this specific case, I would suggest that competition is indeed the element which keeps these friends together. It must be remembered, in fact, that the male group I am analysing is specifically narcissistic, and, therefore, the relationships between its members are affected by a narcissistic attitude. As I have already suggested,

the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem. He cannot live without an admiring audience. His apparent freedom from family ties and institutional constraints does not free him to stand alone or to glory in his individuality. On the contrary, it contributes to his insecurity, which he can overcome only by seeing his 'grandiose self' reflected in the attentions of others, or by attaching himself to those who radiate celebrity, power, and charisma. For the narcissist, the world is a mirror [...].⁷⁰

Being in need of others' approval, the members of the narcissistic group in *Brucia la città* are constantly competing for success, a success that has to be recognised by others in order to be considered as such. Obviously, this pathological situation entraps these young men in a vicious circle, while they implicitly 'fight' for the first place in society. The field in which Iaio is keen to

⁶⁸ Culicchia, *Brucia la città*, p. 268.

⁶⁹ See Sedgwick, *Between Men*.

⁷⁰ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 10.

succeed is in his job as a DJ, and his success seems to depend on him finally being able to buy a new record and play it at the inauguration night at the Tortuga club. The search for the new single by Richie Hawtin aka Plastikman is another thread – together with the search for Allegra – of the novel; unfortunately, Zombi buys the only copy of the record available in Turin:

Un commesso sta uscendo dal magazzino. E con lui c'è... Zombi, con due, no, tre bustone gonfie di dischi. Non è possibile. Diosanto, ti prego, dimmi che non è vero. [...] 'Eihlà, laio!' mi fa Zombi, sorridente. 'Com'è? Sei caldo?' 'Caldissimo' mi sforzo di sorridere a mia volta. Ci stringiamo la mano in stile negroide. Tutt'a un tratto sono marcio di sudore. 'Ehm' mi schiarisco la voce, cercando di controllarmi. 'Sono venuto... a prendere... *Spastik*... il nuovo singolo d'importazione... di Richie Hawtin... aka Plastikman... remixato da... Dubfire dei Deep Dish...' 'Questo?' mi fa lui, estraendolo da una delle due borse. Mi cade la mandibola.⁷¹

laio's disappointment and his unconscious rivalry for taking the record away from 'l'essere che ha messo le mani sull'unica copia esistente a Torino di *Spastik*' (p. 67) culminates on the inauguration night, when Zombi is supposed to play the record and, therefore, be recognised by people attending the event – his audience – as one of the most successful DJs in town. This episode also represents the final phase of laio's attempt to be recognised by others, a process of coming of age which, as I am about to show, is unsuccessful. A few quotations from the chapter 'Inaugurazione' will explain the sequence of events taking place at the night club, mixed with laio's thoughts:

... e li vorrei ammazzare tutti tanto li odio questi bastardi guarda guarda guarda come si dimenano sulla pista le facce orrende un groviglio di serpenti e cocktail e oscene lolite con i loro tatuaggi tribali appena sopra il culo e ansiose di farsi immortalare in tanga [...] e di rivedersi il giorno dopo su YouTube cazzo Zombi è stramazzone a terra sotto la consolle [...] ... e fuori vedo i lampeggianti blu di un'ambulanza ma in pista nessuno sembra essersi accorto di niente [...] e allora metto *Spastik* EVVAI... [...] ... fanculo vi odio andatevene via via via dalla mia vita sparite... ... e adesso che faccio?... ... dove vado?... (pp. 391–3)

It is clear from this extract that laio finally succeeds in playing the record at the inauguration night, while Zombi takes an overdose and, subsequently, enters rehab. What is also visible, from the quotation above, is the lack of satisfaction that such a 'success' provokes in laio. Despite having found

⁷¹ Culicchia, *Brucia la città*, p. 60.

recognition from his audience ('... braccia levate al cielo altri ululati e urla e poi fischi d'approvazione', p. 392), laio loses an integral part of his self, his friends. The homosocial bond, which had already been weakened by Boh's death after a party, is now broken, leaving laio alone. In the last chapter of *Brucia la città*, laio is wandering the streets of the city centre, lost, pretending to call someone with his mobile, while he has no one left to call. I would argue that this rather dark image symbolises the impossibility for laio to come to terms with his self and to find a way to enter adult society. If, in the two previous novels analysed, the recognition of the self within the peer group was a successful way for the male protagonist to see a validation of his identity while contrasting a traditional – and no longer acceptable – process of coming of age, in Culicchia's text the identification within the peer group does not lead to the same result, because it is the consequence of a pathological – narcissistic – personality. I would suggest that the character of Allegra, who is never present in the text, yet is at the centre of laio's thoughts, might symbolise a (remote) possibility of finding a balance between normative adult society and the nightmare-like grotesque subcultural society in which all the protagonists of this novel seem to live. Allegra is the only person who truly knows laio: despite being a drug addict herself, she is seen by laio as his only possibility of rehabilitation. However, Allegra's disappearance at the very beginning of the novel conveys the idea that every chance of surviving is precluded:

non riesco a non pensare ad Allegra mi viene da piangere Allegra perché Allegra io ho bisogno di te sono stufo marcio di questa vita di merda e solo insieme con te posso smettere Allegra torna ti prego [...] Via, via, devo andare via. Ma dove? Allegra. Non è vero che tornerai. Stavolta non succederà più. Lo so. (pp. 391, 398)

Conclusion – The Generation and the Other

As the title of this chapter indicates, the identification of young male generational groups within society is always structured as a constant negotiation of identity in relationship with others. After having analysed this process in each novel, I will now draw my conclusions by further reflecting on the role of others in the texts selected: my aim is to highlight differences and points of connection between the three generational groups. The first 'other' I have identified in my analysis is embodied by parental and, more generally,

adult figures: in a traditional process of coming of age, they play a key role in young people's lives as they are expected to provide an example to follow. However, role models are mostly absent from the narrative works under analysis: in Tondelli's *Altri libertini*, in line with social and cultural changes that were affecting the Italian family structure at that time, the younger generation of the 1970s rejected adult figures. A similar relationship with parental figures also characterises the other two narrative works, although there are some differences. In *Gli sfiorati*, the relationship between father and son is based on an Oedipal rivalry between the two men, which, however, is atypically configured, as the son takes on the role traditionally played by the father. If the father and more generally adult figures are no longer seen as role models for these young men, the situation is slightly different for the Culicchia generation in *Brucia la città*. Despite being utterly absent from the narration and clearly unable to provide a positive example to young people, adults are, in this text, highly influential in conditioning – in a negative way – these young people's process of delaying of age. Therefore, the male generational group seems to follow in the older generation's footsteps.

The protagonists' difficult process of integration within society is mainly due to challenging relationships with adult members of society and to the consequent retreat within the peer group. A second 'other' is then represented by friends, who in these texts play a fundamental role in the process of maturation. For the Tondelli generation, friends are central in the process of 'delaying of age', as they are often those who validate the protagonists' sexuality. Being unable to enter adult society as gay men, Tondelli's characters seek recognition of their identity within the peer group. In Veronesi's and Culicchia's novels, friendship is structured along the lines of homosocial bonding. The stability of these male homosocial bonds is dependent upon the relationship that these young men develop with women. In this regard, it is interesting to reflect on the way in which women are narratively constructed by these two writers. As I have already argued in my analysis, women appear to be objectified by male members of their generation: in *Gli sfiorati*, the male homosocial bonding between Mète and Damiano is based on a mutual attraction to, as well as a mutual exclusion of, Belinda – a relationship that never takes into account Belinda's own desire. In *Brucia la città*, similarly, the male homosocial bond between Iaio, Boh, and Zombi is dependent upon a

mutual exchange of women. I would argue that, in both cases, Veronesi and Culicchia do not seem to question this specific configuration of the relationship between the sexes: the tone used in these narrative texts does not convey either judgement or self-consciousness. I would suggest that this lack of moral judgement and personal opinions reveals these writers' superior aim: the depiction of a generation.

Chapter Four

Challenging Social Norms: The Impossibility of Coming of Age?

The re-elaboration of the *Bildungsroman*'s literary structure in contemporary narrative implies a reconfiguration of its original features – plot, characters, and development – which takes into account social and cultural changes. The narration of a coming of age process in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is necessarily different from that of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* at the end of the eighteenth century, because not only is the social environment in which the process takes place different, but also the way in which the threshold between youth and adulthood is generally understood. In contemporary narrative, youth and adulthood are no longer based on fixed age limits, and the passage between these two life phases is often delayed. The protagonists of the novels analysed in Chapter Three exemplify this trend, since their process of coming of age is delayed further in their adult age. As a consequence of the shift in social mores and cultural beliefs over the centuries, the very concept of 'coming of age' has changed, adapting to new generations of young men and women and adopting national connotations. In this work, I have noted how the protagonists' acquisition of a mature self is often affected by external factors, such as their place in society and their relationship with the 'other'. I have identified a major development of the genre, that I here called 'delaying of age', inasmuch as the process of coming of age undertaken by the male protagonist of these novels is put on hold due to external impediments, mainly social and cultural obligations. It is interesting to notice, however, that the 'delaying of age' narrative pattern is developed differently throughout the corpus of texts. The way in which the male protagonists of these novels face their passage from youth to adulthood depends in fact on their attitude towards the external world and their power relationships with other members of society. In the previous chapter, I argued that the young male protagonists lived this in-between phase of life as a generational experience, which altered the traditional value of 'becoming a man within society' in favour of the creation of an alternative society of peers. In this chapter, the four novels analysed – Tondelli's *Camere separate* and Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra*, *Paso Doble*, and *Ameni inganni* – narrate another path,

which, as I will show, seems to restore some of the traditional features of the *Bildungsroman*. It might be useful to remember here that, in order to be recognised by society as a man, the male hero of the traditional coming of age novel has to follow some fixed steps, including creating a new family – marrying and having children – and financially provide for it by achieving professional status. In the novels under analysis in this chapter, the protagonists clearly attempt to establish relationships which follow this traditional model, but, as the title of this chapter suggests, their path towards a socially acceptable adulthood is doomed to failure. I would, in fact, suggest that, paradoxically, by attempting to restore a traditional social system, they challenge the norms of the society in which they live. Their acquisition of identity is therefore threatened by society's expectations: the results, as I will show, are either an initial adaptation followed by a final discovery of their own identity – as in *Camere separate* – or a surrender to society and its rules, as in Culicchia's novels.

Challenging Heteronormativity in Tondelli's *Camere separate*¹

Tondelli's last novel – *Camere separate* (1989) – is very different from the author's text analysed in Chapter Three, *Altri libertini*. Defined by critics as Tondelli's work of maturity, *Camere separate* is structurally and contextually different from his debut novel: firstly, this is a cohesive work, divided into three movements which feature the same protagonist.² Tondelli modifies the narration's time, juxtaposing different spatial and temporal units, frequently using flashbacks to tie episodes together in order to create an intimate story through the form of a stream of consciousness. This complex structure is, for Tondelli, the only possible way of conceiving a 'romanzo', by personally altering what he defines as “tempo” della narrazione [...] [c]he è innanzitutto tempo letterario e di scrittura e non ha niente a che vedere col tempo in senso

¹ Some of the ideas developed in my analysis of Tondelli's works in this and the previous chapter have already been published in Ilaria Masenga, 'Delaying the Self: Male Coming of Age in Pier Vittorio Tondelli's *Altri libertini* and *Camere separate*', *Quaderni del '900*, XI (2011), 113–22.

² These three movements – 'Verso il silenzio', 'Il mondo di Leo', and 'Camere separate' – give the novel a circular development, repeatedly exploring its three main themes: death, separation, and solitude. See Panzeri, *Il mestiere di scrittore*, p. 977.

“cronologico”, se vogliamo rigorosamente sequenziale, biografico, scandito sulla successione di avvenimenti’.³

Furthermore, from a contextual point of view, *Camere separate* differs from *Altri libertini* mainly because of the specific process of formation the protagonists in the text are dealing with. Whereas in *Altri libertini* the young protagonists’ delaying of age strategy made them retreat within the peer group and replace adult society with a Regime of Brothers, in this novel the protagonist actively seeks inclusion and recognition within society. In both novels there is an impossibility of coming of age as a member of heteronormative society, but the way in which these two novels face this problem is different, because their protagonists’ age and role within society is different. Leo is a thirty-two-year-old successful writer, while the characters in *Altri libertini* were young men in their twenties, marginalised by society for their use of drugs and their non-normative behaviours. However, I would suggest a reading of *Camere separate* as the story of one of those 1970s’ *libertini* facing adulthood: during his youth Leo went through the situations described in *Altri libertini*, experimenting with drugs and consciously ‘destroying’ his life without caring for social values and norms. Thus Tondelli describes Leo and Hermann, the protagonist’s lover in his youth:

[e]rano solamente due ragazzi che correvano incontro all’annientamento con una determinazione che non ammetteva ostacoli. Erano due bellezze che godevano nell’essere offese e violentate poiché entrambi ritenevano che il mondo non li meritasse e che nessuno potesse essere in grado di capire la loro qualità. Erano in guerra contro i valori della società e contro la normalità. Erano ribelli e si sentivano diversi. La loro relazione era precisamente una guerra separata.⁴

Being at war with society was young Leo’s generational response to the denial of his and his peer group’s dissident identities: a decade later, however, he has to face adulthood and the solitude that comes as a consequence of his being different. Being an adult does not imply, for Leo, the end of his own process of coming of age, but, on the contrary, moves the impossibility of coming of age on to a different level: coming of age for the protagonist means being recognised by society as a gay man, without having to renounce his

³ Panzeri, *Il mestiere di scrittore*, p. 975.

⁴ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, ‘Camere separate’, in *Pier Vittorio Tondelli: Opere: Romanzi, teatro, racconti*, ed. by Fulvio Panzeri (Milan: Bompiani, 2000), pp. 909–1106 (p. 1002). All the references to Tondelli’s *Camere separate* are from this edition.

sexuality. Critics and scholars have defined *Camere separate* as a 'romanzo di formazione' and in this section I will develop this definition, analysing the nature of the protagonist's process of self-identification.⁵ The non-linearity of this path has led me to identify a 'delaying of age' process, which, I would argue, provides a temporary solution to the problems raised by Leo's exclusion from heteronormative society. Before analysing this survival strategy in greater detail, I would like to discuss briefly the characteristics which make the novel belong to – or better derive from – the *Bildungsroman* genre.

In an issue of *Panta* devoted to Tondelli, the author Gilberto Severini defines *Camere separate* as the narration of 'un viaggio interiore, [...] biografia (e autobiografia) di un'educazione sentimentale'.⁶ This brief description highlights two central elements of the novel – the journey and the romantic education – which certainly associate the text with the coming of age novel. In the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the hero often had to embark on a journey in order to gain awareness of the outside world and to return to his place of origin with the competencies and skills that made him a man: this *viaggio* was both a real and a metaphorical one and symbolised the path towards maturity. As for the romantic education, the *Bildungsroman* protagonist's process of formation could not be completed without the accomplishment of one of its main purposes: a final marriage and the creation of a new family. The story narrated in *Camere separate* seems to comply – despite some differences that I will underline – with the narrative structure of the *Bildungsroman* genre. Tondelli follows the protagonist, Leo, on a journey – real and metaphorical – after the death of his lover Thomas. Leo recounts his memories of his past before Thomas's death through numerous flashbacks, breaking them up with episodes from the present. He believes this journey, 'la sua spedizione oltre i confini del corpo di Thomas',⁷ to be the solution to his desperation and a way to face mourning, yet I will show later how the journey itself adopts a more profound meaning, since it represents for Leo the discovery of his own self. As I have already argued, the protagonist's process of formation consists of making society accept his sexuality, which he had until then underplayed in order to pursue a successful professional career. Leo's complicated journey towards the

⁵ See the Introduction to this work for examples of critical works that have defined Tondelli's oeuvre as belonging to the coming of age narrative.

⁶ Gilberto Severini, 'Private liturgie', *Panta*, 9 (1992), 102–08 (p. 102).

⁷ Tondelli, *Camere separate*, p. 960.

recognition of his sexual identity is formed by three fundamental relations – with his family, with his lover, and with his writing – which will be the three steps of my analysis of the novel.

Furthermore, *Camere separate* can be read, as suggested by Severini and reiterated by Sinibaldi, as the story of a romantic education whose protagonists are Leo and Thomas. More specifically, Sinibaldi argues that the very centre of Leo's atypical formation lies in the relationship with Thomas and, consequently, in the inextricable relationship between love and death:

la storia di Leo finisce per assumere i tratti insieme familiari e insoliti del romanzo di formazione. Gli elementi del genere sono tutti presenti ma le forme e i contenuti risultano in realtà sconvolti. Il processo di formazione che Leo attraversa e ricostruisce è complicato e incerto, ha un andamento irregolare e indefinito. Mostra piuttosto i tratti [...] di una continua ri-formazione, di un'evoluzione dilazionata e dilatata, di una educazione e autoeducazione che procede per strappi, per scatti e scarti. [...] È dato che nel suo modo peculiare e inconsueto questo è un romanzo di formazione, nel suo cammino Leo deve affrontare i mostri, ossia i grandi nodi di una storia di vita: soprattutto Amore e Morte [...].⁸

The love bond between Leo and Thomas is undermined by death: mourning, as I will show, is a central component of the protagonist's definition of his identity. Furthermore, another element differentiates *Camere separate* from a traditional story of coming of age: the enduring feelings of separateness, solitude, and diversity that characterise its protagonist. Leo's diversity from his peers and from the society in which he lives is multifaceted and is worth detailed analysis; as an introduction, however, I would like to highlight the relationship between this separateness from the world and the 'delaying of age' strategy. Being aware of his different self and lifestyle, Leo has always lived in denial of his sexuality and, as a consequence, of his real identity, in order to hold his place in heteronormative society. Bolongaro has called this process 'accommodation', since Leo had 'to renounce wholeness, to keep his desire away from public view', yet also to rely on 'the power of language to create the perfect public mask'.⁹ I will demonstrate how language and indeed writing are the means through which Leo attempts to express his identity later in this section. Solitude and separateness connect *Camere separate* to Culicchia's novels in this chapter, but, I would argue, there is another *fil rouge* which links

⁸ Marino Sinibaldi, 'So glad to grow older', *Panta*, 9 (1992), 109–16 (pp. 110–11).

⁹ Bolongaro, 'Leo's Passion', p. 103.

these texts. I would suggest that the four narrative works analysed in this chapter are connected by a different presentation of what has been identified as a central element of one's identity: the relationship with the 'other'. Whereas in the previous chapter, this particular relationship was declined in a generational mode, here it is narrated through a more intimate perspective, that of the couple relationship. This precise mode of relationship becomes the fulcrum of the process of 'delaying of age', challenging traditional ideas of love and individuality.

Finally, I would also suggest that *Camere separate* and Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra* and *Paso Doble* might be associated with a more specific development of the coming of age narrative, the *Künstlerroman* – the coming of age of the artist. As in the archetype of the genre, both Leo and Walter – the protagonist of Culicchia's novels – are separated from their peers by their sensitivity and creativity, which means they are perceived as different from society. As Carl Malmgren has underlined in his work on the *Künstlerroman* in the twentieth century, '[t]he root causes of difference, in both the modernist and postmodernist *Künstlerroman*, seem intimately bound up with the question of a distinctive sensibility': this 'awareness or consciousness' is 'a distinguishing feature of the artistic sensibility. The artist is always aware that something is going on. Indeed, he is also aware of his awareness; the artist is *self-conscious*.'¹⁰ Alienation, Malmgren argues, is the result of his life's choice: in other words, separation from society. The 'delaying of age' process in these novels is, therefore, the (temporary) suspension of this pursuit of artistic success, the decision to swap this artistic sensibility for a 'normal' – socially accepted – life. Leo, I will show, 'è diverso' and his being different not only lies in his sexuality, but also in 'il suo scrivere, il dire continuamente in termini di scrittura quello che gli altri sono ben contenti di tacere'.¹¹

Family Relations: A Journey from Childhood to Adulthood

In this section, I will explore Leo's process of formation and adaptation to the world starting with his childhood, highlighting those rites of passage that, I will

¹⁰ Carl D. Malmgren, "From Work to Text": The Modernist and Postmodernist *Künstlerroman*, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 21 (1987), 5–28 (pp. 7–8).

¹¹ Tondelli, *Camere separate*, p. 1102.

suggest, have been fundamental steps of the protagonist's life. A key element to consider in this analysis – a point of connection between this part and the other two sections on the couple relationship and the writing – is the idea of separateness and detachment. From the very title, Tondelli casts a sense of solitude and diversity over the whole novel: the words *separato*, *diverso*, and *solo* are frequently repeated throughout the text and used to describe Leo's condition. The *camere separate* strategy adopted by Leo alludes to the protagonist's decision not to live together with his lover Thomas, yet to preserve an independence from him based on a geographic distance. However, as suggested by Severini, the *camere separate* have been a permanent feature of Leo's life, who 'vive da sempre in più *camere separate*':

[è] separato, in quanto omosessuale, dalla vita sociale e religiosa del suo paese d'origine; è separato, cercando l'amore assoluto, nei luoghi dove i gay esprimono liberamente la loro sessualità; è separato persino quando trova l'amore che desidera, in conflitto con un suo complesso bisogno di solitudine. [...] è separato da 'un lutto profondo e sacro, che sta iniziando per la prima volta a portare'.¹²

Leo's behaviour and identity seem to challenge not only heteronormative but also homonormative lifestyles: he is separated both in a heteronormative ('paese d'origine') and homonormative ('luoghi dove i gay esprimono liberamente la propria sessualità') social context, not being able to identify with either of these two groups. Leo's separateness from the world can be traced back to his childhood, which the protagonist remembers during his return home, in Correggio. One of the steps of the journey after Thomas's death – *secondo movimento*, 'Il mondo di Leo' – is significant for two reasons: it offers an insight into Leo's relationship with the members of his family and triggers Leo's memory of his past, allowing the reader to understand the causes of Leo's diversity and separateness. The narrative episode under analysis here runs on two parallel temporal levels: the present – Leo's visit to his family – and the past – Leo's own perspective on his native place, 'uno sguardo affettivo dotato di memoria, temprato dalla lontananza e dalla separazione'.¹³ Therefore, the reader knows from the very beginning that the protagonist's relationship with Correggio, its people, and his own family is not an uncomplicated and linear

¹² Severini, 'Private liturgie', p. 102.

¹³ Tondelli, *Camere separate*, p. 1006.

one: even in this case, the sense of detachment that characterises his whole existence is very much present. Time and space are strictly intertwined with Leo's problematic sense of belonging to his community. The small church on the main road, where Leo's grandmother used to bring him as a child, is still there on his arrival, even though it shows the passage of time, and represents, for Leo, 'l'unità di misura del tempo' (p. 1006); on the other hand, the road between his native house and the cemetery symbolises, for Leo, 'tutta la sua vita'. The connection between life and place is not, however, a joyful one, as he compares this 'paio di chilometri' to 'stazioni di una via della croce, quella dell'incarnazione e della sofferenza' (p. 1007). The relationships between Leo and Correggio – and therefore Leo and his family – are contradictory inasmuch as they develop between conflicting feelings and emotions: on the one hand, Leo is aware of the influence of its origins on his individuality – its native place plays a role in his formation – yet, on the other hand, his integration within this community is deemed a failure. Due to the ambivalent nature of Leo's feelings towards his origins, I will show how the impossibility of being recognised by his family and community as a gay man is excruciatingly painful.

A feeling of pain is, indeed, central to the memories of his childhood and adolescence which are triggered by the return home: more specifically, the image of the 'via della croce' is also recalled in one of Leo's central memories, the religious procession on Good Friday. Here the narration is again differentiated on three temporal levels: the present is represented by Leo's visit to his family in Correggio during Holy Week, before Easter. The past is further divided into a recent past – Leo and Thomas's trip to Barcelona during Holy Week a few years before – and into the remote events of Leo's adolescence when he, together with other boys, had to carry the Madonna statue during the procession. It is interesting to analyse this precise episode in Leo's past because, I would suggest, it gives an insight into the origins of Leo's diversity from his peers and his community. The narration focuses on the suffering experienced by the young Leo in carrying the statue: a pain which is both physical and psychological. As Bolongaro has suggested, 'the religious celebration turns into a trial consisting of torturing the flesh in order to discipline male subjectivity',¹⁴ a trial to prove one's maturity and to secure a place in the

¹⁴ Bolongaro, 'Leo's Passion', p. 100.

community which, I would add, is based on an atavistic and hegemonic idea of masculinity. Leo remembers his pain during the procession, associated with physical suffering, but also with the awareness of marginalisation as the punishment for his failure:

quello che lo terrorizzava non era tanto il dolore fisico, che era acutissimo e sfibrante – sentiva il legno della staffa penetrargli nella carne – ma era proprio la vergogna. Se avesse mollato, nessuno dei suoi compagni l'avrebbe più guardato, sarebbe stato ancora una volta il debole, il piagnone, l'emarginato.¹⁵

Marginalisation is here linked to the impossibility of complying with a hegemonic masculinity which, Leo feels, does not represent the gender paradigm on which he is founding his process of coming of age.¹⁶ Furthermore, I would argue, Leo's ambivalent response to this masculine test – 'non poteva abbandonare, e non poteva assolutamente continuare' – reveals the contradictory feelings associated with his 'dolorosa crescita al mondo' (p. 1029). The discovery of his being different derives, in fact, from the discovery of his homosexuality and the consequent impossibility of coming of age as the other men in his community.¹⁷ The adult Leo looks at the same procession many years later, during his visit home, and, when the statue of Christ carried by twelve men passes in front of him, he suddenly realises that he has missed the final recognition within this heteronormative community: 'lui si accorge che non è mai arrivato a questo punto del corteo, che si è arrestato prima, che la vita lo ha spinto ad abbandonare poco prima di accedere alla parte della processione da sempre riservata agli uomini e all'età adulta' (p. 1029).

Leo's sexuality is the cause of his impossible identification within his native community and, even if this is not explicitly highlighted in the novel, is also the reason for his difficult relationship with his family. Tondelli does not make any references to Leo's coming out within his family, but I believe the absence of a narrative discourse about his homosexuality is symptomatic of the protagonist's inability to find a place within the familial context to freely express his individuality. His own denial of his mourning for Thomas's death is, as I am

¹⁵ Tondelli, *Camere separate*, pp. 1028–29.

¹⁶ For a discussion of 'hegemonic masculinity', see Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005); Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender & Society*, 19 (2005), 829–59.

¹⁷ '[s]i sentì profondamente umiliato, proprio ferito nell'intimo, per essere stato costretto a sopportare qualcosa contro la sua natura, per essere stato obbligato a dimostrare agli altri la cosa più stupida e insignificante di questo mondo, e cioè che lui era uguale a loro' (p. 1029).

about to show, the final – negative – response to his quest for recognition. Tondelli's vivid description of Leo's family introduces the reader to a particular familial context, whose members – Leo's father and mother – seem not to comply with traditional, or stereotypical, gender relations. Despite the display of a powerful and stereotypical masculinity which, as I have pointed out, seems to inform the life of this community, Leo's father is portrayed as symbolising a weak masculinity. The father is a silent man, not particularly successful, and not rich: father and son are aware of being different from one another, yet despite their 'estraneità' produced by 'la comune consapevolezza delle loro vite differenti' (p. 1010), they find a point of connection in solitude: '[i]n questo suo lato del carattere, scontroso e solitario, Leo lo apprezza. Si sente uguale. Sono due uomini che non si parlano e, soprattutto, non si toccano da almeno vent'anni' (p. 1011). If the father's identity seems to mirror Leo's life – '[s]ono uno lo specchio dell'altro' (p. 1011) – Leo's mother is, in opposition, described as a powerful and energetic woman. As suggested by Bolongaro, '[f]rom early childhood, Leo learns to associate motherhood and the feminine with a strong, healthy body and the mastery of language'.¹⁸ From the son's perspective, however, these characteristics are part of a community ritual to which he does not belong, and he cannot help but reclaim his distance, and his role as observer of the 'vita di un paese separato' (p. 1012).

Another episode of Leo's adolescence, which the protagonist remembers while visiting home, is the relationship with his childhood sweetheart, the most popular girl within the group of peers. This relationship is experienced by the young Leo with a ceaseless sense of guilt for not being worthy of the girl's attention. His sentiment is a mixture of love and reassurance: her protection and love helped him through this period of his life, during which 'viveva nel terrore della propria crescita al mondo dei maschi e degli adulti' (p. 1031). Aware of his inability to comply with the rules imposed by his gender, Leo calmly accepted the relationship between the girl and his best friend. On the contrary, he seemed to find his *raison d'être* in the confidant role. I would argue that this episode establishes the basis of the 'delaying of age' – or *camere separate* – strategy which will influence Leo's process of identification throughout his life: by positioning himself apart from the real action, Leo accepts his liminal role

¹⁸ Bolongaro, 'Leo's Passion', p. 98.

and consciously avoids identification within the peer group of friends and within society later to live a separate, yet incomplete life. Thus Tondelli depicts Leo's refusal to accept his identity:

Dopo qualche mese, proprio durante l'estate, nel passaggio fra le medie e il ginnasio, lei aveva scelto un altro, il miglior amico di Leo. Ma Leo non si disperò. Continuava ad amarla, ma ora poteva farlo nascostamente, da una posizione laterale. Poteva inserirsi in quel rapporto come confidente dell'uno e dell'altra, rendersi indispensabile. Sia l'amico, sia la sua ex, gli raccontavano di quello che succedeva e in questo suo trovarsi ora da una parte ora dall'altra, in questo suo condividere le ragioni di uno o dell'altra, lui si sentì forte, con un ruolo preciso. E crebbe così a ridosso di altri amori, di storie che non sarebbero mai state la sua 'storia' ma che, in un certo senso, lui era in grado di elaborare per gli altri. E in questo suo sentirsi distante, immerso nei problemi, vivente con essi, ma sempre da una posizione allontanata, come un pulsante cuore separato, lui trovò l'osservazione e la scrittura e, forse, un motivo per crescere senza essere immediatamente macellato. (pp. 1031–32)

The long quotation is fundamental here because it casts light on the process of 'delaying of age' that Leo decides to adopt during his youth. The impossibility of identifying with his peers and the awareness of being different from the other young men make Leo retreat into himself and take up a peripheral role. By living at the margins of relationships, carefully avoiding any protagonist's role, he is able to preserve and protect his troubled sexual identity from the society that surrounds him which, he knows, will not be able to understand. In this situation of extreme separation, however, Leo finds relief through the process of writing, a protection which allows him to become a member of adult society without being destroyed for his non-normative identity. Through this process of delaying of age, Leo denies his sexuality in order to achieve apparent recognition by society, a recognition based on his success as a writer. The 'mestiere di scrittore' is, therefore, a mask which, as I will show later in this chapter, offers a distraction from Leo's true identity.

In this regard, it is interesting to focus briefly on the concept of separateness and on the idea of adopting a lateral position because this is, in my opinion, a strategy adopted by Tondelli himself. Some critics and scholars have underlined the numerous parallels between Leo and Tondelli, therefore identifying a strong autobiographical component in the novel.¹⁹ Albeit

¹⁹ *Camere separate* has often been defined as Tondelli's most autobiographical work. See, for instance, Enrico Minardi, 'Lo spazio autobiografico nell'opera narrativa di P. V. Tondelli', *Seminario Tondelli* (2002) <<http://minerva2.reggionet.it/pvt/allegati/Minardi.pdf>> [accessed 5 December 2010].

fascinating, this specific reading of Tondelli's narrative is beyond the scope of this work. The focus of this analysis is to observe the particular nature of the coming of age process in the novel, identifying the elements of influence in its development. However, I believe that connecting author and fiction is, in this case, important, because it helps us reflect on the 'delaying of age' strategy as a condition which informs Tondelli's writing as a whole. In her study on commitment in contemporary Italian narrative, Burns argues that, while analysing Tondelli's oeuvre, one has 'to retain this image of being at once present and absent, inside and outside', meaning with that 'a constant condition of achieving full presence by means of a strategic absence'.²⁰ If for Leo (and Tondelli) being apart – being present, yet at the same time absent – becomes the strategy thanks to which he can mask his diversity, then this diversity lies not only in his homosexuality, but also in his writing. More precisely, his sexual identity and his writing are strictly intertwined, the writing being the way to dissimulate his identity, to shift the focus from one non-normative 'lifestyle' (homosexuality) to the other (life devoted to writing).

Diversity and detachment, therefore, lie at the basis of each relationship Leo undertakes, because the protagonist has to disguise his identity in order to be recognised as one of the others, and he prefers to hide his 'real' identity from society. A clear example of Leo's different behaviour, compared to that of his native community, can be traced to the act of mourning for his lover's death. The concept of mourning is central to my analysis of the relationship between Leo, his identity, and the act of writing, and my thought on this narrative aspect will be developed later in this chapter. In this section, however, I would like to focus on the way in which the protagonist is allowed, or better not allowed, to mourn for Thomas. His mourning breaks with heteronormative boundaries, breaching heterosexual norms and placing the lost loved object on a male (same sex) figure; therefore, Leo's loss is both unthinkable and unspeakable within a heterosexual and intolerant context such as that of the community in Correggio. Leo's tragedy 'è un dramma che non appartiene a nessuno tranne che a lui'. He is left alone in his desperation, because 'nessuno, negli anni a venire, ricorderà il suo amore perduto, [...] nessuno gli toccherà una spalla per dirgli coraggio'.²¹ This reflection on his solitude and the lack of friendly help in

²⁰ Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, p. 117.

²¹ Tondelli, *Camere separate*, p. 1012.

this painful moment leads Leo to hypothesise a change in the state of things, but his is a dark picture of an uncertain future:

E lui sa che per gli uomini la cosa più difficile è proprio stabilire un contatto con il mondo degli altri. Lui cerca di fare aderire questi mondi distanti e differenti. Ma è un'impresa che gli appare impossibile. [...] Solo nel futuro, solo fra molti anni, forse qualcosa cambierà. Nasceranno persone che tenteranno in altri modi di mettere in contatto i mondi diversi nei quali ognuno continua a vivere. Nascerà finalmente qualcuno per cui la memoria dell'entità 'Leo-e-Thomas' verrà accettata e custodita come un valore da cui trarre vita e speranza. Forse solo tra centinaia di anni. (pp. 1012–13)

Leo is mourning for his lover Thomas, and, more generally, for the impossibility of his homosexual love; the visit home as part of Leo's journey of discovering his real identity is a return to his roots and to his childhood in an attempt to ease the uncomfortable feelings of detachment and diversity from society. The episode closes with another reference to death: observing the final moments of the Good Friday procession, Leo is struck by the figure of the dead Christ. The religious image is overlapped by the image of Thomas's body, destroyed by his mortal illness, and by the image of a defeated Leo. For Leo, the procession turns into his own funeral ceremony, and the statue of Christ becomes 'il corpo morto di Leo, di quel bambino che non è mai cambiato e che è soltanto mutato, giorno dopo giorno, sfogliandosi come un fiore. [...] Lui è umiliato, sconfitto. Senza nessuna speranza di resurrezione, né per sé, né per Thomas' (p. 1032). Closing this narrative episode with this image, Tondelli highlights the difficulty of Leo's process of coming of age: the young Leo has not been able to blossom into a successful man, and instead he has withered ('sfogliandosi come un fiore'), becoming the shadow of his potential self. The process of coming of age is not finished and Leo's journey through his past and towards the future has to continue in order for him to successfully transform his 'delaying of age' ('accommodation') into a complete recognition within society.

Before moving on to the next section, I will analyse one last episode of Leo's youth, which further explains the young man's decision to delay his coming of age, yet, at the same time, marks the passage from youth to adulthood, 'il superamento traumatico, violentissimo, della barriera che lo teneva racchiuso nella sua adolescenza, nei suoi miti, nelle sue illusioni' (p. 942). Having tried drugs for the first time, twenty-year-old Leo starts a nightmare-like trip. This *viaggio* is both imagined – triggered by drugs – and real,

when Leo has to return home at the end of the night. After having lost consciousness and reached the river's delta in a delirious state of mind, he regains awareness and realises the importance of this episode as a watershed in his own coming of age. Leo understands that ' [a]vrebbe dovuto costruirsi, giorno dopo giorno [...]. Era, in un certo senso, una persona nuova; o forse era semplicemente morto un Leo e ne era nato uno diverso' (pp. 953–54). The old Leo has left scars on the new Leo, a man who has renounced the fight against a society that does not accept his identity: in fact, he decides to live his life as a game, 'avrebbe imparato le regole. Avrebbe obbedito, avrebbe accettato'. The delaying of age strategy takes place, leaving a different Leo to adapt to heteronormativity: '[i]l suo sguardo era profondamente cambiato. Era la stessa persona, ma portava in sé la traccia sanguinante di un aborto, di un Leo che si era bruciato' (p. 954). The clarity of thought caused by the use of drugs in this episode provides Leo with a clear picture of his destiny: if integration within society is not possible, then disguising his identity and dissimulating his sexual choices seem the only feasible solutions. By aborting his real identity, Leo is able to become part of society, but only delaying his real coming of age as a homosexual man.

The Couple and the Individual: A Journey into Love

An analysis of the couple relationship between Leo and his lover Thomas is essential to understanding the nature of Leo's identity and the development of his process of 'delaying of age'. Such an analysis, I suggest, should start from the very central event around which the whole novel gravitates: the dissolution of this relationship due to Thomas's death. The last visit Leo pays to Thomas is set in the hospital where the young man is spending his last days. This narrative episode is important inasmuch as it delineates a twofold scenario, in which two incompatible familial structures come into contact: Thomas's 'real' family – his father and mother – and Thomas's 'hypothetical' family, formed by Leo. The story narrated by Tondelli is one that challenges social rules and, more specifically, heteronormative relationships: Leo's path towards identification is a ceaseless struggle with those norms imposed by society on sexual identity, seeking new ways of definition which go beyond generally accepted heterosexuality. In this episode, hetero- and homonormativity face each other,

placing themselves at the antipodes of this last fight between life and death. On the one hand, there are Thomas's parents who represent life, or at least the hope of survival. This nuclear family is described as the only legitimate group of people who can be at Thomas's side during his illness and has the right to fight for a miraculous recovery: '[m]a qui stiamo combattendo per la vita. Qui la vita è in gioco. E noi, un padre, una madre, un figlio siamo le figure reali della vita.'²² Again, Leo is excluded by those rights which make a family as such, therefore Leo is an invisible widower, 'vedovo di un compagno che è come non avesse mai avuto' (p. 941). Thomas and Leo's relationship challenges an institutionalised idea of love, couple, and family; society and its institutions – '[i] padri e le madri, la chiesa, lo stato, gli uffici d'anagrafe' – relegate Leo and his love to a peripheral position, to 'una zona separata della società' (p. 940). The impossible recognition of their couple relationship is both cause and consequence of the confusion which Leo feels around his identity: if relationships are usually helpful in defining one's role within society and the couple, in *Camere separate* Leo struggles to find a definition of his role and his self through them.

Butler's study of melancholia in connection with gender and sexual identification will be a central tool for the analysis of Leo's attitude towards mourning and homosexual grief in the following part of this work. By looking at heterosexual identification and its relation to gender identification, Butler argues that masculinity is confirmed through prohibition of homosexual desire: in order to become a man, one has to desire 'the woman he would never be'.²³ In other words, heterosexuality is based on a radical differentiation from homosexuality, so that 'heterosexual identity is purchased through a melancholic incorporation of the love it disavows' (Butler, p. 28). This is a double disavowal, inasmuch as it includes a refusal to avow any homosexual attachment and, at the same time, the refusal to grieve its loss. Other than being developed on an individual level, Butler maintains that the prohibition of homosexuality in heterosexual identification becomes ritualised through culture, giving rise to 'a culture of gender melancholy in which masculinity and femininity emerge as the traces of an ungrieved and ungrievable love' (Butler, p. 28); indeed they are confirmed through the repudiation of homosexual desire. Homosexuality, as a

²² Tondelli, *Camere separate*, p. 940.

²³ Butler, *Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification*, p. 26.

consequence, is an identification which is not supposed to happen and, when it does, 'it happens only under the official sign of its prohibition and disavowal'. Identification as a homosexual man or woman, thus, is accompanied by a form of melancholia culturally recognised by society. '[H]omosexual desire becomes a source of guilt' (Butler, p. 28), since homosexual attachments are not acknowledged within heteronormative society, making it difficult and often impossible to identify with a positive image of homosexuality which is not melancholia-ridden. This is, indeed, the framework which regulates Leo's identification within society and his relationship with Thomas. As Tondelli says: 'non esiste nemmeno una parola, in nessun vocabolario umano, che possa definire chi per lui è stato non un marito, non una moglie, non un amante, non solamente un compagno ma la parte essenziale di un nuovo e comune destino'.²⁴ The difficulty in defining his role within an atypical familial context is expressed here by the use of a negative comparison to normative relationships – husband and wife – but also to 'categories' which can be used to define models of homosexual relationships, such as lover and partner. I would argue, therefore, that Leo's identity in relation to his sexuality also challenges homonormative positioning, refusing to adopt a role, to be identified as part of a homosexual relationship. As I have already argued, Leo's process of 'delaying of age' is a strategy he adopts to mask his homosexuality and avoid rejection by society; the relationship with Thomas and his loss are, as I am about to show, potentially disruptive as they might unmask Leo's identity.

As I have shown analysing the episode of the 'trip' triggered by drugs, during his youth Leo decides to underplay his sexuality and adapt to the world and its norms. The relationship with Thomas seems to interrupt his 'delaying of age' and to bring Leo's identity into the open, making it acceptable to the outside world. During a lecture Leo delivers at the University in Duisburg, he realises that, despite his will, he is no longer considered an independent individual; on the contrary, he is now part of a duality, a couple which, for the first time, is recognised as such by the community. Leo is now 'Leo-con-Thomas' and their union seems to be the means through which the protagonist can finally assert his identity without renouncing his sexuality:

²⁴ Tondelli, *Camere separate*, p. 941.

Sentì celebrata la sua unione, accettata, protetta, la sentì come un valore sociale fondamentale [...]. Era una sensazione nuova, perché Leo non aveva mai creduto al valore dell'accettazione. Non gli importava, teoricamente, essere accettato né legittimato da nessuno. Era in se stesso che traeva valore e legge. Non dall'esterno. (p. 967)

The love story between Leo and Thomas is a distant relationship – the former works as a writer in Milan and the latter is a student in Paris – and the two men meet while travelling through Europe. After having finished his degree, Thomas has to decide where to try and start his career as a musician and decides he wants to move in with Leo. This sudden decision puts the couple at risk and makes Leo decide to adopt the 'delaying of age' strategy in his relationship by keeping Thomas at a distance and developing the *camere separate* strategy. Leo's refusal to live with Thomas is based on a double lack: the fear of losing his own independence – his 'masked' identity – and the absence of role models for their love. In this work, I have argued that the young male protagonists of the narrative texts under analysis are often short of role model figures, who can guide them during their process of formation. In the previous chapter, the impossibility of identification with role models was caused by a generational gap. In *Camere separate*, the situation is further complicated: whereas it is understandable that Leo could not find a model for his homosexual love within the heteronormative society, it is interesting to note that he also refuses to follow what he defines 'quelle convivenze grottesche di omosessuali'. Leo admits that he lacks 'modelli di comportamento da seguire' to successfully live together with another man. The problem, he explains, lies in the nature of their relationship: to live together, for Leo, would mean to normalise a relationship that is non-normative. Hence, Tondelli explains this, I would define contradictory, situation: '[v]ivere insieme significava credere in un valore che nessuno era in grado di riconoscere. [...] Dovevano per forza normalizzare un rapporto che la società non poteva appunto recepire come norma?' The risk is, according to the author, that of becoming 'due patetici replicanti di un medesimo, insostenibile, immaginario maschile, svirilizzato e infemminato' (p. 1067). After a two-year long-distance relationship, Leo refuses Thomas's wish to spend their lives together and gives a name to their separate condition. *Camere separate* is 'un rapporto di contiguità, di appartenenza ma non di possesso' (p. 1071), to which Leo will be loyal until the end. It is also a way to preserve Leo's solitude which has been a constant feature of his individuality,

and which, after Thomas's death, becomes a defining feature of 'Leo-senza-Thomas'. In the following section, I will investigate the relationship between Leo and the process of writing, which, I argue, is inextricably intertwined with grief and a sense of guilt.

Writing: A Journey into Mourning

After having delineated the nature of the relationship between Leo and Thomas, I will now focus on Leo's separateness and diversity. A first central element of Leo's identity is his sense of belonging to the process of writing. The protagonist is a successful writer, but his profession is also a more general lifestyle choice: written words are, for him, the lens through which he observes the outside world. An example will help in defining the centrality of writing in Leo's life. The *camere separate* strategy elaborated by Leo implied a prolific correspondence between the two lovers: the letters aim to 'tenere aperta la possibilità di parola, di confronto, di discussione', but, more importantly, they are a way to narrate their sexual desire. Sexuality is here diverted towards writing, in an attempt to preserve that negation of sexual desire, which I have already defined as central in Leo's 'delaying of age' strategy. As Tondelli puts it, '[i]n un certo senso stavano dirottando, su quelle lettere, il loro desiderio di essere amanti. Lo deviavano dalla sfera sessuale a quella del linguaggio' (p. 1070). This shift of sexual desire from sexuality to language implies, I would argue, a narrative approach to Leo and Thomas's love relationship. Their love story takes place within the secure frameworks of narrative: in other words, the entity 'Leo-con-Thomas' exists because Leo has imagined and created it, by writing about it. The *camere separate* strategy denies Thomas any agency in his relationship, by giving Leo full responsibility for their love story. Thomas plays a marginal role, accusing Leo of keeping him distant for his writing's sake,²⁵ seriously undermining their relationship's strength. The journey Leo undertakes after Thomas's death can be interpreted as a search for his own individuality. Having failed to shape his identity in the relationships with his family, lover, and community, Leo finally realises that 'la sua vita è ormai troppo

²⁵ Thus, Thomas accuses Leo: 'Tu mi vuoi tenere lontano per potermi scrivere. Se io vivessi con te, non scriveresti le tue lettere. E non mi potresti pensare come un personaggio della tua messinscena [...]' (p. 1078). Elsewhere in the novel, Thomas defines Leo as 'un avvoltoio' (p. 1078) and 'un burattinaio sadico' (p. 1069).

indistricabilmente legata allo scrivere' (p. 1101). Again, Tondelli moves the focus from sexuality to writing:

se la sua vita sentimentale è un disastro, se nel profondo è inquieto e non troverà mai pace, è perché lui è diverso e si deve costruire una scala di valori partendo proprio da questa sua diversità. Niente di quello che ha trovato gli è andato bene e lui si sta sforzando, da anni, di cercare la maniera giusta. La sua diversità, quello che lo distingue dagli amici del paese in cui è nato, non è tanto il fatto di non avere un lavoro, né una casa, né un compagno, né figli, ma proprio il suo scrivere, il dire continuamente in termini di scrittura quello che gli altri sono ben contenti di tacere. La sua sessualità, la sua sentimentalità si giocano non con altre persone, come lui ha sempre creduto, finendo ogni volta con il rompersi la testa, ma proprio nell'elaborazione costante, nel corpo a corpo, con un testo che ancora non c'è. (p. 1102)

It is during the process of mourning for Thomas that Leo understands the nature of his being different as strictly intertwined with his writing: his identity is metaphorically described, in the quotation above, as a text that has yet to be written ('un testo che ancora non c'è'). Writing through mourning can thus be experienced as an empowering act, inasmuch as it allows the writer to work through his grief. The act of writing allows Leo to finally find a definition of his identity and to admit that he has always lived 'in un mondo separato, quello della letteratura, [...] sempre con la consapevolezza che mai la pienezza della vita, come comunemente la intendono gli altri, sarebbe stata sua'.²⁶ Making sense of Thomas's death is Leo's last chance to eventually 'come of age', become aware of his diversity, and reclaim his sexuality. The journey throughout Europe is the visible aspect of an internal journey which, to be successful, has to help Leo move on from melancholia to mourning. The concept of melancholia, as theorised by Freud in *The Ego and the Id* and in *Mourning and Melancholia*, assumes an incorporation of the attachment (the mourned love object) through a process of identification.²⁷ In *Camere separate*, the melancholia-to-mourning passage is twofold, involving the grief for the 'other' (the lover) and the grief for the homosexual self. I have already discussed Butler's approach to heterosexual and homosexual identification, highlighting the melancholic component that both processes bear: in the case of homosexual love and its loss, Butler argues, the super ego becomes the site of self-beratement and feelings of grief, transforming the experience of mourning –

²⁶ Tondelli, *Camere separate*, p. 1103.

²⁷ Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, pp. 28–39.

impossible for a loss which is not acknowledged as such – into a melancholic phase.²⁸ The grief for the loss of a love object within a homosexual relationship remains unspeakable and, as such, affects the melancholic subject (the lover) with guilt for his homosexual attachment and with society's denial of his mourning. According to Freud, melancholia 'borrows some of its features from mourning, and the others from the process of regression from narcissistic object-choice to narcissism. It is on the one hand, like mourning, a reaction to the real loss of a loved object', yet, in melancholic subjects, mourning is expressed 'in the form of self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object', causing a narcissistic identification between the subject and his lost love object.²⁹

In *Camere separate*, Leo's 'delaying of age' can be explained as a reaction to an impossible identification with a (homosexual) desire which has been pre-emptively denied by society. Furthermore, after Thomas's death, this unsuccessful identification is further reinforced by society's disavowal of Leo's loss and his incommunicable grief. As homosexual desire, homosexual mourning lacks a collective acknowledgment: Leo is suffering for a 'lutto irregolare' and is unable to show his pain for a tragic event (the death of his lover) which has no place within heteronormative society:

Leo si chiede se l'aver voluto contenere il proprio dolore in una sfera intima e inaccessibile agli altri, l'averlo distillato goccia a goccia in solitudine, abbia reso impossibile l'elaborazione finale del suo lutto. [...] Ma proprio per questo, come gli era accaduto di accorgersi durante la processione di quel Venerdì Santo, nel suo paese, lui non poteva esibire il suo dolore. Poiché nessuna società riconoscerebbe come autentico un lutto come il suo; né, di conseguenza, possiederebbe quella ritualità atta a risolvere, socialmente, una catastrofe non ancora ufficializzata.³⁰

Due to the lack of a ritual able to deal with homosexual loss, Leo needs to adopt a different perspective: through writing he is finally able to oppose the invisibility society imposes on homosexuality and to accept his 'different' self, to move away from that 'posizione di attesa' (p. 995) in which Thomas's death had definitely left him. I would, therefore, argue that writing is, for Leo, the means

²⁸ Butler, *Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification*, p. 28.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 237–60 (p. 250).

³⁰ Tondelli, *Camere separate*, p. 1088.

through which he attempts to move away from melancholia, a way to express his unspeakable grief and to find an acceptable way to mourn his loss within society.

The first page of the novel introduces Leo while, on board an aeroplane, he observes his no longer young reflection in the window and thinks of Thomas and his death; as in a circular movement, the novel closes with another flight, the final part of Leo's journey. Listening to Morrissey's song, Leo recognises his experience in the lyrics – 'I'm so glad to grow older, to move away from those younger years' – and feels that '[i]n un qualche modo è felice', for the journey to survive the loss of his lover and to find his self is coming to an end. The image of death, however, closes the text, thus reinforcing the connection between homosexual identity, grief, and loss: at the end of his life, Leo 'rivedrà gli occhi di Thomas come li ha visti quell'ultima volta. Allora saprà, con una determinazione commossa e anche disperata, che non c'è più niente da fare. [...] che per lui, finalmente, [...] è giunto il momento di dirsi addio' (pp. 1105–06).

Challenging Postmodern Society in Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra* and *Paso Doble*

Culicchia's debut work, *Tutti giù per terra*, narrates the story of Walter, a young man in his early twenties who is taking his first steps in the world. Walter is a young man-in-waiting: having finished school, he is waiting to make up his mind and decide what to do with his life. The beginning of the book outlines the world in which Walter has to live, a world which is about to fall apart: '[v]erso la fine degli anni Ottanta il mondo pareva proprio sul punto di cascare e io nell'attesa mi limitavo a girare in tondo, giorno dopo giorno'.³¹ The narration follows the protagonist's daily life, providing a vivid portrait of an Italian society which is facing the consequences of consumerism and an increasing gap between richer and poorer social groups. Walter's family belongs to this latter class and the protagonist's modest financial situation is one of the features that distinguish him from the traditional *Bildungsroman*'s hero. As in a *girotondo*, Walter spends his days looking for an opportunity to understand what he wants from life, his only clear wish being that of not wanting to get a job or join the rat race like

³¹ Giuseppe Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra* (Milan: Garzanti, 1994), p. 13. All the references to Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra* are from this edition.

everyone else: '[n]on volevo fare carriera. Non volevo rinchiudermi in una gabbia' (p. 13). The story of Walter continues in *Paso Doble*,³² Culicchia's second novel, which focuses on the protagonist's life on the verge of adulthood. In my work, I will read these two novels as two phases of Walter's coming of age: *Tutti giù per terra* represents the protagonist's initial 'delaying of age', its refusal of responsibilities and integration within society and an apparent return to a partially traditional idea of gender relationships. *Paso Doble*, on the other hand, narrates Walter's progressive adaptation to the world, portraying, as I will show, the failure of his dreams in favour of its final inclusion within adult society.

Before analysing the texts in greater detail, I would like to briefly compare their narrative structure to the *Bildungsroman* genre. Like *Camere separate*, Culicchia's novels deal with a specific type of coming of age narrative, in which physical and psychological development are accompanied by an artistic maturation. Walter is an aspiring writer, an idealistic young man who does not believe in productivity and its consequent consumerism which characterise society. As the protagonist of the *Künstlerroman*, his artistic sensibility is the cause of his alienation not only from society and his peer group, but, in this case, also from the familial context. To come of age for such a protagonist should mean to become a successful writer and to get recognition of this role within his community: however, a market-led society such as the one described by Culicchia is hostile to a life project which does not comply with rules of production and profit. A further difference between the archetype of the literary genre and *Tutti giù per terra* and *Paso Doble* lies, in my opinion, in the social class the protagonist belongs to. In the *Künstlerroman* and, more generally, in the *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist is a member of the bourgeoisie, coming from a well-off family which has the possibility to financially support him during his process of acquiring a well-regarded social position. Walter, on the contrary, lacks any kind of help and encouragement from his family, which expects different life choices from him, different from the ones he has in mind for his future.

Despite not having primarily focused on the authorial role and agency in my work, I believe it necessary to briefly linger over this aspect in relation to Culicchia's and Tondelli's narrative. References to the writer's role in the

³² Giuseppe Culicchia, *Paso Doble* (Milan: Garzanti, 1995). All the references to Culicchia's *Paso Doble* are from this edition.

elaboration of his texts have been made throughout my study, especially where Tondelli's oeuvre is concerned, often informed by an autobiographical component. Elements of autobiography can also be identified in Culicchia's novels; however, I would argue that a reading of Culicchia's works has, more importantly, to take into account the role Tondelli played in his formation as a writer. Culicchia published his first short stories in *Papergang*, edited by Tondelli as part of the *Progetto Under 25*,³³ and *Tutti giù per terra* and *Paso Doble* further develop the themes and situations which were central in his first narrative works. Introducing Culicchia in this edited book, Tondelli gives a clear definition of the author's narrative style and themes, one which highlights the constant irony of his mode of writing and the attention to the difficulties concerning young people and their relationship with society:

[a]ttraverso i semplici e seriali meccanismi della letteratura di genere i ragazzi riescono a far passare inquietudini, disagi generazionali, disadattamenti e insoddisfazioni, anche una vena satirica nei confronti della società e del presente, che altrimenti si diluirebbero nella monotonia e nell'anonimato di resoconti interiori, diaristici, assolutamente privati.³⁴

The importance of Tondelli for Culicchia's career as a writer is evident not only in terms of stylistic influence – the use of *elenchi*, as, for instance, in *Brucia la città* –³⁵ but also in the mentor-like role played by Tondelli. This is clearly 'celebrated' in *Tutti giù per terra*, in which Tondelli features while presenting *Camere separate* at the *Salone internazionale del libro* in Turin, where Walter is working. The young protagonist asks Tondelli to read and comment on his short stories – a fictional transposition of the real encounter between the two writers.³⁶ I would, therefore, argue that Tondelli's mentoring role could be compared to that of an older brother for the twenty-five-year-old Culicchia. The concept of brother, here, has not to be considered in terms of familial relations, yet it has a generational characterisation.³⁷ As I have shown in

³³ See the Introduction to this work.

³⁴ RaiLibro, 'Giuseppe Culicchia', <www.railibro.rai.it/under25/Under25CapitoloVI.pdf> [accessed 10 November 2012].

³⁵ See Chapter Three.

³⁶ In order to be published in Tondelli's anthologies, young people had to mail their short stories: Culicchia's first published works went through a process of selection operated by Tondelli himself.

³⁷ Elisabetta Mondello praises Tondelli for having established a strong connection with younger writers in terms of narrative innovation, playing for them the role of an artistic 'brother'. According to Mondello, Tondelli's value derives from 'aver proposto scelte estetiche che altri giovani potevano (e possono ancor oggi) vivere come contigue alle proprie, con le stesse radici.

Chapter Three while discussing the new social formation replacing patriarchy in contemporary Italian society – the Regime of the Brother – brothers are the older members of a generational group, who, by impersonating a father-like role, become role models for the younger age group. For Culicchia, Tondelli, who is ten years older, can be considered as a brother inasmuch as he was a professional example during the first years of his career; furthermore, I would identify a connection between the two writers in terms of narrative themes, especially in the re-elaboration of the coming of age trope and the values associated with young people's aspirations. Walter and the protagonists of *Altri libertini* are the same age, but are separated by a ten-year gap during which society has dramatically changed. In the 1980s, Tondelli's *libertini* believed in non-normative behaviours and life choices, expressing their identities through the use of drugs or being alienated by society for their sexuality. Walter's peers, on the contrary, are subjugated by society, adapting to a consumerist way of life in which there is no longer room (and need) for revolutionary feelings. In *Tutti giù per terra*, Walter's 'delaying of age' consists in refusing to adhere to his peer group's world view: in this sense, he can be considered an oppositional figure as the protagonists of Tondelli's novel. However, I will show how society in the 1990s gradually influences Walter's process of coming of age, making him eventually surrender to traditional social norms in *Paso Doble*. The use of the term 'traditional' is here dependent on the historical period to which it is referred: in other words, what is considered traditional changes according to changes within society and the social milieu.

Coming back to my discourse on the relationship between Tondelli and Culicchia, I would argue that the character of Walter represents Culicchia's nostalgia for a social and historical period in which young people reclaimed their identities in opposition to adult society's beliefs and impositions. However, Walter's failure in reclaiming his individuality and his final integration and annulation within consumer society indicates a more general failure of the 1970s' 'revolution' and its ideals. As Culicchia puts it, while commenting on the younger generation in *Tutti giù per terra*, '[n]el '68, negli anni Settanta, buoni o cattivi che fossero, c'erano dei valori. A noi non resta che contare il numero di

Appunto "fraterne". See Mondello, *In principio fu Tondelli*, p. 18. Also see the Introduction to this work.

carte di credito nei portafogli'.³⁸ The dissolution of any values and the loss of moral principles among the Italian bourgeoisie and middle class have, since then, been at the centre of the majority of Culicchia's works.³⁹

In this section, I have discussed the idea of traditional social norms, highlighting that what is meant with 'traditional' still changes and adapts to social developments. In this regard, it is interesting to notice how the nostalgia which characterises Culicchia's work is not only a nostalgia for revolutionary feelings of a past society, but it is also a nostalgia for previous (patriarchal) forms of gender relationships. As I will show in my analysis, in *Brucia la città* the young male protagonist finds it difficult to establish relationships with his female peers, mainly because of a different idea of romantic and sexual relationships. Changes in gender roles and expectations have led young women to behave in a way which is no longer expected of them by patriarchal society. I will develop this issue in the following sections, making reference to theories on postmodern society and couple relationships by Bauman and Giddens. My analysis of Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra* and *Paso Doble* will focus on two main themes, which I believe to be fundamental rites of passage for the young protagonist: firstly, the search for a job and, more generally, a precarious job environment versus education, creativity and writing; secondly, the couple relationship versus individuality. Since very little critical work on Culicchia and his oeuvre is available, I will base my analysis on sociological and psychoanalytical literature.

Walter: A Postmodern Working-Class Hero?

As one of the main elements of uncertainty in Walter's life, the entry into the job environment is a fundamental rite of passage in the protagonist's coming of age. At the very beginning of *Tutti giù per terra*, the young man declares his firm opposition to the prospect of finding a job and being trapped in repetitive and non-creative work. The shopping assistant role acquires, in this sense, every negative connotation:

³⁸ RaiLibro, 'Giuseppe Culicchia'.

³⁹ This theme has been treated in *Brucia la città*, but also in *Bla Bla Bla* and the recently published *Venere in metrò*. See Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla Bla Bla* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000). Also see Giuseppe Culicchia, *Venere in metrò* (Milan: Mondadori, 2012).

[i] commessi guardavano la gente fuori dai negozi come gli animali dello zoo guardavano i turisti. Rispetto a loro mi sentivo in libertà. Ma ero solo libero di non far niente. [...] Non volevo fare un lavoro da commesso. Non volevo fare carriera. Non volevo rinchiudermi in una gabbia. Intanto però la mia gabbia era la città. Le sue strade sempre uguali erano il mio labirinto. Senza un filo a cui aggrapparmi. Senza più nulla da vedere.⁴⁰

Whereas for the hero of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, becoming successful in his job was a main objective, for Walter the real success lies in personal freedom, in severing every connection with an environment which does not offer any chance of creative maturation. In search of a more fulfilling occupation, Walter spends his days strolling into the town centre without an aim: the town, Turin, is here compared to a cage, because it does not offer young people the possibility to follow their real aspirations. Walter's idealism is the key to understanding his process of 'delaying of age' in *Tutti giù per terra*: the protagonist constantly opposes those steps which society is impelling him to follow, and, as I am about to show, his attitude is strongly contested by his family, especially by his father. Despite the constant uncertainty which characterises his life, in *Tutti giù per terra* Walter is able to resist society's influence and to partly follow his aspirations. However, as the analysis of *Paso Doble* later in this section will demonstrate, this 'delaying of age' phase is soon overcome: a few years later, Walter is trapped in a shop assistant's job and his coming of age can eventually take place, even though not in the way the protagonist would have expected during his youth. However, before focusing on the negative evolution of Walter's life, I will analyse his process of 'delaying of age' with regard to the unstable balance between duty and desire, namely between a job and creativity.

First of all, in order to understand the way in which work is depicted in Culicchia's novels, it is necessary to understand the changes which affected society during the nineties. As I have shown in Chapter Two, in the 1990s young people's career perspectives were increasingly doomed in an unstable work environment with precarious opportunities. The so-called *precarietà* is at the centre of Walter's occupational path, influencing his own process of coming of age. If identities are no longer shaped around work – one of the main factors defining the self in the *Bildungsroman* – the transition from youth to adulthood becomes a work in progress. This idea of a 'work in progress' identity suits not

⁴⁰ Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra*, p. 13.

only Culicchia's protagonist, but, more generally, all the characters of the novels under analysis in my study. Despite being a characteristic of the coming of age novel, the novelty is that in Italian contemporary society the 'work in progress' feature of identity does not easily evolve into a formed and fixed social identity, rather, as I am arguing here, adult identity usually stays 'in the making' for longer.

The conflict between generations with regard to the idea of work and career is central in *Tutti giù per terra* and it takes place on two different social levels: on a familial level, this contrast is represented by the father-son relationship; on a more general level, it is a critique of the 1968 generation. Walter's relationship with his family is problematic, especially with regards to his father. A retired FIAT worker, the man dreams of a more successful life for his son. 'Mio padre invece era ossessionato dalla parola carriera. Non poteva permettersi di mandarmi alla Bocconi ma sperava almeno di vedermi diventare uno di quei capireparto che alla FIAT lo avevano frustrato per tutta l'esistenza',⁴¹ explains Walter. Hoping for a different future for his son, Walter's father seems to play the traditional role of family provider, expecting Walter to follow in his footsteps. However, Culicchia's description of Walter's father as unscrupulous and obsessed by money works as an introduction to a broader critique of postmodern society.⁴² As I have already argued, Culicchia denounces the progressive destruction of those revolutionary ideas which were at the centre of youth protests in the 1970s. The contemporary Italian society in his books has tragically turned into a consumerist society, ruled by more powerful values, such as money, fame, and success. Therefore, I would argue that Walter's impossible integration within his peer group and within the adult world is the consequence of the protagonist's nostalgia for a past which, however, he has not personally experienced. His creativity and desire for freedom constantly clashes with society's rules and expectations: delaying his coming of age is seen as Walter's only chance to avoid, or better delay, the inevitable annihilation of his identity within postmodern society. In this sense, Walter's first job as a social carer for the gypsy community can be read as his

⁴¹ Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra*, p. 20.

⁴² "E allora devi capire che soltanto i soldi contano nella vita. I soldi, i soldi, i soldi. Mettitele in testa. Gente che ha cominciato con una carrozzeria adesso è padrona di mezza Italia, ricordatelo" [...] "Alla tua età devi pensare a fare le scarpe agli altri, anziché perdere tempo sui libri" – Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra*, pp. 26–27.

first step into the adult world. When he receives the confirmation of his start date, Walter suddenly realises that his youth is about to finish and that he cannot avoid a scary future:

[f]antastico, pensai, finalmente si comincia. Poi capii che quello per me in un certo senso era l'inizio della fine. Ancora pochi giorni e l'epoca della scuola sarebbe terminata per sempre. Mi sentivo depresso. Stavo invecchiando. Il servizio civile non rappresentava altro che il buco attraverso cui sarei finito dritto sparato in quel cesso chiamato mondo del lavoro. Prima o poi avrei venduto me stesso per uno stipendio mensile appena sufficiente a sopravvivere e pagare le rate della macchina, della lavastoviglie, del videoregistratore. [...] Sarei stato stritolato da un meccanismo omicida. Tre settimane di ferie all'anno. Otto ore di lavoro al giorno. Fine settimana libero, certo, giusto per guardare la televisione o andare alla partita. (p. 41)

The entry into adulthood and the consequent acceptance of responsibilities mean to become part of a homogeneous society, in which individual differences are not taken into account. Walter's 'delaying of age' is thus represented by his wish to avoid such responsibilities. It is interesting to analyse the protagonist's fear of the work environment in the light of the socio-economic situation in Italy during the nineties. As I have already argued, the analysis of Walter's coming of age is indissolubly intertwined with the idea of *precarietà*: more specifically, according to Culicchia, 'Walter è stato a tutti gli effetti il primo precario della narrativa italiana'.⁴³ I have argued that the protagonist of *Tutti giù per terra* feels a nostalgia for 1970s ideology, and I am showing now how this nostalgia is linked to his 'delaying of age' and consequent entry into the work environment as a *precario*. In Chapter Two, I suggested that the roots of *precarietà* in Italian society can be traced back to the youth protest of the 1970s: young people's refusal of a Fordist idea of work, however, has been transformed in contemporary Italy into an exclusion from the work environment itself. In other words, if in the 1970s the younger generation reclaimed its right to autonomy and self-valorisation, a decade later being *precario* was no longer a choice, but an imposed condition which, since then, has increasingly affected young people in Italy. If we look at Walter's delaying of age in the light of this development, it is clear that Walter's refusal of work is very similar to that refusal which was at the basis of the 1970s' youth protest: 'la

⁴³ Interview with Giuseppe Culicchia, 'Culicchia per CineComedy a Mirafiori, su *Tutti giù per terra*', CineComedy <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVc40ajF0Kc>> [accessed 1 October 2012].

paura di Walter è quella di finire intrappolato in un lavoro a tempo pieno, a tempo indeterminato, sempre uguale ogni giorno, giorno dopo giorno, quindi rimanere ancorato alla vecchia idea novecentesca del lavoro in fabbrica, che è quella che ha fatto la vita di suo padre' ('Culicchia per CineComedy'). While defending his individuality and creativity from the process of work, which he considers dehumanising, he becomes part of an even more impersonal process, that of the *lavoro precario*. His identity is annulled by a new work ethic, according to which people's wishes and desires are again ignored. The *precarietà* as youth's (and not only) postmodern work condition is, therefore, 'perdita, privazione, sottrazione – di diritti, status sociale, sicurezze e garanzie, benefici', rendering it a 'condizione esistenziale' and, more specifically, a 'marchio generazionale'.⁴⁴ Walter's apparently endless series of interviews for fixed-term jobs – despite the exaggerations typical of Culicchia's ironic writing style – reflects a more general situation affecting young people in postmodern Italy.

In the passage from one job to another, Walter tries to find time to devote to his main interest: writing. Through writing, Walter is able to understand himself and his confused identity ('Non riconoscevo quasi mai me stesso, guardandomi allo specchio, ma in quei racconti sì. Ecco cosa volevo fare nella vita: scrivere').⁴⁵ In this sense, Walter's coming of age might be read as the formation of an artist, a *Künstlerroman*, in which the protagonist follows his own creative aspirations to finally get recognition from society precisely by virtue of his creative genius. However, a coming of age model such as the one advocated by this traditional genre is no longer possible for Walter. Culicchia's protagonist, in fact, does not lack artistic value, but another fundamental component of the artistic maturation: a supportive environment which, at least in terms of money, could help the young artist go smoothly through any impediments he might encounter during his career. Being a working-class 'hero', Walter is forced to follow a different model of coming of age, which is therefore different from that of the bourgeois *Bildungsroman* protagonist.

Before moving on to the next section, I would like to focus on a final aspect of Walter's contrast with the previous generation: the critique of the 1968

⁴⁴ Loredana Polezzi, 'Precarietà: Definizione per l'uso, tra autobiografia e teoria', *La Libellula: Primo Quaderno*, 1 (2011), 12–17 (p. 12).

⁴⁵ Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra*, p. 96.

revolution, a narrative theme which will return in Culicchia's oeuvre.⁴⁶ As for *Tutti giù per terra*, the protagonist looks back to the values of the youth protest in the 1970s, yet he is also aware of the dissolution of those values in contemporary Italy, clearly visible in the behaviour of the *ex-sessantottini*. The occupation of the university – where Walter is taking a degree in philosophy – by the anarchist group *Pantera*, seems to have given rise to a new 1968:

Leggendo i giornali sembrava che fossimo di fronte a una specie di nuovo '68, per fortuna meno compromesso con pericolose ideologie... Me li immaginavo gli autori di quegli articoli, quasi tutti exsessantottini ora trasformati in affermati professionisti, in competizione quotidiana per la villa al mare, l'auto prestigiosa, le vacanze esclusive... Se dopo vent'anni i risultati sarebbero stati quelli, speravo proprio che non si trattasse di un nuovo '68. (p. 69)

The disappointment over the failure of those ideals once supported by the 1968 revolution and a general impossibility to integrate within society and the peer group are also the consequences of a more intimate confusion about roles and expectations. As a result of his inability to find a point of connection with the young community, Walter compares himself to '[i]l prototipo della casalinga frustrata'. The only chance of salvation for the young protagonist lies in the process of writing, his identity being intertwined not with taking up a job ('[l]a confusione che provavo davanti a un curriculum vitae in bianco era dovuta alla mia mancanza di identità'), but with his creativity (p. 109).

At the beginning of this chapter, I have argued that the *fil rouge* which links all the texts under analysis together is their 'revolutionary' potential, inasmuch as the protagonists of the novels challenge society and its rules in different ways. Of course, the idea of what is to be considered in line with social norms changes according to the historical social period in which the story is set and according to the identity process followed by the male character. In Tondelli's *Camere separate*, the protagonist's path of maturation challenged an idea of society which equals heteronormativity. The process of 'delaying of age', for Leo, was a strategy aimed to mask his own homosexual identity. In Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra* and *Paso Doble*, the protagonist no longer challenges society's norms on sexual identity, but his identification within society is made impossible by his different professional and financial status. In

⁴⁶ See for instance the character of Donata Cavalla, the *ex-sessantottina* teacher in *Il paese delle meraviglie*.

this case, thus, the 'delaying of age' strategy involves not being caught in the process of de-humanisation of the work environment by refusing to take part in it, in following one's aspirations, and – in the shift from delaying to coming of age – in fulfilling himself by realising one's dreams. The process of writing, central to both Tondelli's and Culicchia's novels, was the means through which Leo was able to accept his own sexual identity and, eventually, announce it to society. Despite also being the key to Walter's identity, writing and creativity are not enough to resist society's consumerism and its production-led approach. Walter's coming of age is, inevitably, the failure of his adolescent dreams and the annihilation of his individual identity in favour of a 'tailor-made' identity already planned for him by society. He progressively conforms to a consumerist lifestyle, by taking up a job, opening a bank account, renting a house, and buying a television set, a car, and designer clothes. The total annulation of his individual identity comes at the end of *Paso Doble*: Walter has become the manager of the video shop where he started his career as a shop assistant and through repetition – one of Culicchia's writing devices – the author again presents the novel's opening scene, in which Walter was starting his first day of work. The only difference lies in the fact that roles are inverted: Walter is now the shop manager. Despite trying his best, Walter has to conform to that role that society expects him to comply with: 'Alla fine ero diventato anche io un commesso. Dalla mia gabbia guardavo fuori, ma non c'era più nulla da vedere.'⁴⁷

Romantic Love in the Postmodern Era

In analysing Culicchia's first and second novels in the light of a development of the *Bildungsroman* in twentieth-century Italian literature, I have highlighted not only the changes undergone between the traditional literary genres and these more recent examples, but I have also underlined differences in the new 'delaying of age' model itself. In fact, this re-elaboration of the coming of age novel depends on the different meaning attributed to those rites of passage which play an important role in the young man's process of maturation. For instance, one literary *topos* which is present in both Tondelli's and Culicchia's

⁴⁷ Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra*, p. 131.

texts – and that is central in the *Bildungsroman* plot – is the journey. A symbol of independence, seen as the opportunity for the *Bildungsroman*'s hero to gain valuable experience, the journey assumes, in the 'delaying of age' novel, a different meaning, losing its connotation as a step towards the entry into adult society. In *Altri libertini*, for instance, the protagonists' journey in northern Europe symbolised their search for sexual and individual freedom away from a stifling Italian society; in *Camere separate*, Leo's journey through Europe had the aim of helping him overcome his grief for the death of his lover. The journey *topos* is also present in Culicchia's *Paso Doble*; as I have already argued, the protagonist in this novel shares values and objectives with the previous – 1970s – youth generation and, therefore, he is alienated from his peer group. Leaving on a journey towards northern Europe, Walter attempts to revitalise the spirit of independence that characterised this rite of passage for young people in the 1970s. However, there is a main difference between the value of the journey for the protagonists of *Altri libertini* and for Walter: the former embarked on their adventures to avoid those roles which society expected them to play. Culicchia's protagonist, on the contrary, is part of the societal system, he has already adapted to social requirements, taking up a job, changing his life, and forgetting the dreams of his youth accordingly. Two events in Walter's life prompt him to make the apparently life-changing decision to travel towards northern Europe: firstly, his girlfriend Tatjana moves to Finland to take up a new job and leaves him alone; this narrative episode is soon followed by the encounter with Eric, a man who travels the world supporting his ceaseless journey with occasional jobs. Leaving his 'piccole certezze'⁴⁸ and his job among many doubts,⁴⁹ Walter starts a draining journey to Finland and around northern Europe, during which he realises that he is no longer in search of a definition of his identity, that his job defines him, and that he has eventually adapted to the role society has imposed upon him. The final recognition of the dependence of Walter's identity on his professional status comes precisely during his journey in

⁴⁸ Culicchia, *Paso Doble*, p. 89.

⁴⁹ After the encounter with Eric, Walter reflects: 'La sera prima di addormentarmi ripensavo a quanto mi aveva detto Eric. Forse il suo era infantilismo, rifiuto di crescere, sindrome di Peter Pan. Oppure ci vedeva chiaro e io stavo sbagliando tutto [...]. Il lavoro aveva occupato ogni spazio dentro e fuori di me, togliendomi l'energia e la fantasia necessarie a vivere diversamente. Allo stesso tempo, lasciarlo per cercarne un altro mi sembrava una follia' – Culicchia, *Paso Doble*, p. 109.

Finland. After having found Tatjana, he realises that her lifestyle is totally incompatible with his. During a walk on the iced Baltic Sea, Walter reflects:

Soltanto una settimana prima, nonostante la lontananza, l'avevo sentita vicina. Ora avanzava nella neve a pochi passi da me, eppure non era mai stata così distante. La mancanza di lei dopo la sua partenza, il desiderio di riabbracciarla, sentire la sua voce, parlarle, tutto appariva improvvisamente remoto, staccato. Mi chiedevo che cosa sarebbe successo se il ghiaccio sotto i miei piedi si fosse aperto. Probabilmente sarei morto congelato. Non aveva molta importanza. (p. 131)

The journey seems to be further confirmation of Walter's difficult identification within society: his romantic relationship with Tatjana is not what he expected to be. Despite his confusion about his life, in other people's eyes, Walter has a precise role within society. The encounter with another Italian in the isolated bar where he goes with Tatjana during their walk reveals that despite his efforts, Walter's worst fear has become real: his identity and his professional status have become intertwined, the latter defining who he is: 'Un tipo seduto al tavolo accanto al nostro mi guardava con insistenza. Che cazzo vorrà, pensai. "Ehi, ma lei lavora in quell'edicola del centro!", mi disse in italiano, illuminandosi. Non era possibile' (p. 132). The promotion to manager closes Walter's process of coming of age, making him part of his peer group and of society by shaping his identity along with traditional expectations.

Another important element in the process of defining one's identity is the relationship the young man establishes with others. I have already shown the impossibility of a relationship between Walter and his family, based on a generational gap between father and son which cannot be filled. In this section, I will focus on romantic relationships: I will show how the idea of 'tradition' in terms of love and sex has changed over the years and how the protagonist adapts to these changes. In analysing romantic and sexual relationships in *Tutti giù per terra* and *Paso Doble*, the first reflection that comes to mind is their absence from the narrative: especially in *Tutti giù per terra*, but also in its sequel, the protagonist complains about his solitude. The state of being lonely was also a central narrative element in *Camere separate* and in both cases the feeling derives from the impossibility of seeing one's identity accepted by others. More specifically, in Tondelli's novel, solitude was the consequence of society's disavowal of his homosexual identity; conversely, in Culicchia's narrative texts

this disavowal does not come from society and instead it depends on the protagonist's refusal to adapt to traditional couple relationships. In other words, while heteronormative society refused to validate Leo and Thomas's relationship, Walter consciously opposes the rules imposed by society to regulate sexual and romantic relationships by refusing to follow them.

After the death of his aunt Carlotta, the only adult figure who seemed to understand and support him, Walter reflects on his solitude and separateness from the rest of society and his peer group:

Non ero mai stato così solo. Solo ero nato. Solo avevo vissuto sino ad allora. Solo sarei morto un giorno, come la zia. Non si poteva risolvere la cosa mettendosi con qualcuno. Non era tanto facile. Eravamo fatti a quel modo, staccati gli uni dagli altri. Non c'era Dio. Non c'era un cazzo di niente. I tessuti finivano per marcire e disfarsi e a poco a poco tutto scompariva. Non rimaneva più niente di ciò che eravamo stati. Niente dei nostri sogni. Niente del nostro modo di sorridere o camminare. Non restava più niente di niente.⁵⁰

Despite its depressing tone, which is of course influenced by the recent death of Walter's aunt, I would argue that this quotation highlights another point of connection between Walter's and Leo's 'delaying of age' processes: the impossibility of a true relationship with the 'other'. In Tondelli's novel, the *camere separate* strategy exemplified Leo's desire not to normalise a relationship which was non-normative and to preserve his solitude. In the case of Culicchia's protagonist, the impossibility of a relationship with the 'other' depends, I would argue, on the protagonist's inexperience with women and on the changes in gender and sexual roles in postmodern society.

Building on the discussion of changes within the job environment, I would like to extend this idea of a precarious identity condition to love and couple relationships. As Bauman argues, postmodern society is characterised by '[a]n unprecedented fluidity, fragility and in-built transience (the famed "flexibility")' which 'mark all sorts of social bonds which but a few dozen of years ago combined into a durable, reliable framework inside which a web of human interactions could be securely woven'.⁵¹ The idea of *precarietà* also defines romantic and sexual relationships, changing therefore the traditional model of the couple relationship and the power between sexes in the couple itself. In this section, I will analyse Walter's acquisition of identity through romantic and

⁵⁰ Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra*, p. 75.

⁵¹ Bauman, *Liquid Love*, p. 91.

sexual relationships in the light of the changes in gender roles and in sexual identity that have taken place in society since the 1970s. In my analysis, I will follow Giddens's theories on intimacy, with regard to the connection between sexuality and love, with self-identity. In his study of sexuality and love in postmodern society, Giddens starts his analysis by criticising Foucault and his ideas on the development of the self. According to Foucault, self-identity was derived from a specific 'technology' of the self, constructed by those discourses available in society; on the contrary, Giddens underlines the unfixed character of identity in postmodernity. In a 'society of high reflexivity', self-identity is 'open' and can be considered as 'a reflexive project – a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future', in which sexuality plays an important role.⁵² Therefore, if one's identity depends on sexuality – meaning with that sexual choices and relationships – it is clear that the process of becoming a man is influenced by changes in social mores, especially concerning female sexual autonomy and empowerment. In the case of Culicchia's novels, the coming of age of the young male protagonist is certainly dependent on his sexual initiation, seen as a rite of passage in his path towards maturity; Walter's virginity is one of the causes of his inability to 'communicate' effectively with the other sex, to integrate within his peer group:

Per quanto mi riguardava, togliermi le ragazze di dosso non era mai stato un problema. Più che altro addosso non mi erano mai venute. [...] Le ragazze volevano uomini veri, abbronzati, sicuri di sé. Gente con la macchina giusta e i vestiti firmati. Oppure, molto più raramente, cercavano tipi impegnati, coinvolti, politicizzati [...]. Io non appartenevo a nessuna delle due squadre.⁵³

Walter is an outsider because he does not conform to these socially accepted models of young masculinities; furthermore, he is also unable to establish a relationship with women, because his approach is based on a traditional way of relating with the other sex which does not take into account postmodern female sexual autonomy and emancipation. In Giddens's words, Walter's idea of love and sexual relationships is still based on the ideal of 'romantic love', which, however, is no longer a valid model of relationship in postmodern society, and it has been replaced by 'confluent love'. Romantic love calls for an attraction between partners which is based on 'the projective

⁵² Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 30.

⁵³ Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra*, p. 24.

identification of *amour passion*': in a heterosexual relationship, the power between the sexes is often unbalanced, leading women to 'domestic subjection'. Furthermore, sexual satisfaction in romantic love derives from the fulfilling romantic relationship itself, with little or no connection to eroticism. On the contrary, confluent love – the love relationship of postmodern society – implies equality between the partners and, for the first time, gives the '*ars erotica*' a central place in romantic relationships, making sexual pleasure reciprocal.⁵⁴ In *Tutti giù per terra*, the young male protagonist is unable to adapt to the confluent love model which seems to permeate romantic and sexual relationships between his peers. Firstly, Walter complains about being too old to be a virgin in a society in which young people have sex very early in their lives:

Giornali e settimanali pubblicavano periodicamente inchieste dalle quali risultava che i ragazzi e le ragazze della mia generazione scopavano giovanissimi. La maggioranza degli intervistati ci dava dentro col sesso orale fin dai sedici anni. A diciassette avevano il loro primo rapporto completo. Molti a diciotto erano già nauseati dalla carne e passavano alla coca. Io a ventuno ero ancora vergine.⁵⁵

A year later, the encounter with Beatrice, a girl who attends Walter's university, seems to eventually offer Walter the opportunity to have sex for the first time. It is interesting to analyse this narrative scene, as the relationship between Walter and Beatrice contains, in my opinion, all the elements of confluent love. If we compare it to romantic love, the first thing to notice is the power dynamic between the sexes: power relations are completely overturned, with the sexual approach coming from the female partner. Beatrice makes the first move, inviting Walter to lunch at her place and, more importantly, to have sex with her. Walter's reaction reveals his insecurity and anxiety about his self-identity and sexuality:

'Mi piacerebbe scoparti, dopo mangiato'. In un secondo il cervello mi si cementificò attorno alla parola magica: SCOPARE. Caddi in preda alla confusione più totale. Che cosa avrebbe risposto in una situazione del genere Marlon Brando? Come ci si comportava con un clitoride? Quanto avrei dovuto penetrarla? Sapeva di avere a che fare con un vergine? Gli uomini provavano dolore la prima volta? Era lei il grande amore della mia vita? Volevo davvero scoparmela, o meglio, farmi scopare? E per dirla francamente: qual era l'altezza media di un buon pene in stato di erezione? (p. 78)

⁵⁴ Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, pp. 61–62.

⁵⁵ Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra*, p. 24.

As Giddens argues, confluent love is based on reciprocal sexual pleasure and the importance of sexual skills, which 'become organised reflexively via a multitude of sources of sexual information, advice and training':⁵⁶ in *Tutti giù per terra*, I would argue that Walter's reaction described in the quotation above reveals a contrast between information and experience. On the one hand, there is the amount of information about sex which, in postmodern society, is widely available, providing 'the capability of giving and experiencing sexual satisfaction' (Giddens, p. 62); on the other hand, there is Walter's anxiety and lack of experience which makes him refuse Beatrice's approach. The protagonist realises that his behaviour does not comply with normative expectations: Walter's ideal of sexual relationships is still based on the romantic love paradigm, according to which sexual satisfaction depends on 'a feeling of wholeness with the other' and on romance (Giddens, p. 62). His attitude towards sex symbolises a contrast not only between romantic and confluent love, but also between a traditional and a postmodern modality of coming of age. The process of becoming a man seems to no longer be linked to the formation of a family, yet lies in the ability to conform to confluent love. As Walter says,

Pur essendo ancora vergine a ventidue anni, pretendevo anche di scopare per amore, solo per amore. [...] Monsieur Bovary. Il giovane Werther. La testa di cazzo. Volevo il grande amore, l'amore autentico, l'amore vero. Ma dove vivevo? Mi rendevo conto di come erano fatti gli esseri umani? La gente si sposava per solitudine, convenienza, conformismo, paura.⁵⁷

Walter's uncertainty and inadequacy can be read as nostalgia for more traditional gender roles in couple relationships (romantic love); however, as Giddens suggests, in confluent love relationships '[a]nxiety based on lack of knowledge about sex is a persistent theme, as are chronic sentiments of inferiority and personal confusion'.⁵⁸

As I have already argued, *Paso Doble* represents the final adaptation to society, the renunciation of every resistance (delaying of age strategy) and a coming of age which means, for Walter, following the rules imposed by society

⁵⁶ Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, pp. 62–63.

⁵⁷ Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra*, p. 80.

⁵⁸ Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 118.

and becoming exactly like the negative models he has tried to avoid during his youth. In the work environment, he becomes the manager of the video shop in which he works and replicates the behaviour and lifestyle of his own previous manager. As for his relationships with women, the romantic love ideal which he attempted to follow during his delaying of age fails in the face of the impossibility of finding true love. After a brief relationship with the German teacher Tatjana, which ends when she moves to Finland, Walter is lonely again. Through an ironic and hyper-realistic narrative style, Culicchia describes Walter's final annihilation of his youthful aspirations; as in a fall towards a nightmare-like reality, the protagonist gives up every dream: firstly, he becomes 'trapped' in a repetitive job, which he does not like, but which he has to do to support himself. As a consequence, he definitively stops writing and gradually changes his lifestyle. Furthermore, he gives up any chance of finding a partner and finding his romantic love relationship and he withdraws into the world of pornography. Pornography will return as a central issue in one of Culicchia's later works, *Ameni inganni*, which I will analyse in the following section.

Challenging Reality in Culicchia's *Ameni inganni*

The last novel under analysis in this work –Culicchia's *Ameni inganni* (2011) – closes my figurative journey through the representation of the coming of age novel from the late 1970s to the present. The novel is symbolically placed at the end of my study because it represents, I believe, a further development of the coming of age narrative. As I have demonstrated in this work, contemporary Italian narrative challenges the traditional idea of coming of age, by altering the steps involved in the process and by extending the age of the transition from youth to adulthood. The result is a prolonged adolescence – a 'delaying of age' – which seems to characterise the paths of growth of the fictional protagonists of the novels selected, according to the anthropological development in Italian society named as *lunga gioventù* (see Chapter Two). *Ameni inganni* is a good example of this social transformation, insomuch as it portrays the 'delaying of age' of Alberto, a forty-one-year-old man whose lifestyle has not changed at all since his adolescence. Alberto's life seemed to stop when he was twenty years old, when he broke up with his high-school girlfriend Letizia and retreated into a solitary life, devoting himself to his two pervasive passions: modelling

spaceships and reading pornographic magazines. Alberto, the narrator of his own story, lives in the fantasy world of his adolescence: he has not left his parent's house and he is still financially supported by his mother's pension. However, he is finally compelled to face reality and to enter adulthood when his mother dies: his coming of age will be, as I will show in my analysis, an attempt to restore his relationship with Letizia – he accidentally meets her after twenty years – and to give up his adolescent passions. More specifically, to come of age for Alberto would mean to renounce his fantasies and to enter the real world, accepting its rules and responsibilities: a task that is deemed impossible.

While analysing Culicchia's works, it is necessary to acknowledge an important feature of his narrative style: the use of irony and exaggeration. His stories are often narrated through the lens of irony, which, I would argue, is used to connect fictional situations to contemporary social phenomena.⁵⁹ In the case of *Ameni inganni*, Alberto's inability to keep pace with the society in which he lives aims to represent a generational ineptitude in dealing with a social context which expects everyone to be performative. In Culicchia's words, Alberto 'soffre un po' di questa malattia nostra, dei 40enni di oggi [...] una generazione che fa fatica ad accettare questa idea di crescere, di prendersi delle responsabilità'. Despite the tragicomic tone that characterises Alberto's vicissitudes, Culicchia draws a clear parallel between the fictional and real world, highlighting the fact that 'tutti noi siamo un po' Alberto, Alberto è un po' dentro ciascuno di noi, perché ciascuno di noi fa fatica a trovarsi a suo agio in un mondo che richiede sempre di più, dobbiamo essere sempre più performativi'.⁶⁰ Alberto's response to a society which has greatly changed since his adolescent years is that of stopping his coming of age and avoiding taking up any responsibilities normally associated with adulthood. In this sense, the death of his mother is a rite of passage for the protagonist, inasmuch as it forces him to consider a potential new lifestyle and the final entry into the adult world.⁶¹

⁵⁹ An ironic style was, for instance, a central element in *Brucia la città*, analysed in Chapter Three.

⁶⁰ Interview with Giuseppe Culicchia, 'BOL.IT intervista Giuseppe Culicchia... smoking d'autore per *Ameni inganni*', BOL.IT, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ttTPgtKs9g&feature=relmfu>> [accessed 1 October 2012].

⁶¹ Thus Culicchia describes his novel: 'Il mio nuovo libro è la storia di un 40enne di nome Alberto, che ha fatto di tutto per riuscire a non vivere, a cristallizzare la sua vita quando aveva 20 anni e da lì in avanti si è rifiutato di mettersi in gioco. Ha avuto un'unica fidanzata, proprio quando aveva 20 anni, che è Letizia. A un certo punto, quando muore la madre di Alberto, Alberto si ritrova improvvisamente solo e deve fare i conti con la solitudine [...]. L'incontro con Letizia da un certo punto di vista è salvifico, perché spezza la solitudine in cui si è rinchiuso

In the following sections, I will analyse in greater detail Alberto's delaying of age strategy and his consequent coming of age process: the protagonist's attempt to eventually become part of adult society is, however, destabilised by the web of deception which has always been a constant feature of his presenting himself to the 'other'. As the title of the novel suggests, Alberto is a liar, who deceives others and himself by inventing his own parallel life. As I will show, despite his attempts, Alberto will not be able to complete his process of coming of age in its traditional sense, because of those *inganni*, lies and self-deception, which have always been part of his life. Alberto's delaying of age and his subsequent struggle to accomplish his process of coming of age will be analysed against the background of his relationship with others. In the following section, I will focus on Alberto's life before his second encounter with Letizia, in order to understand how his 'delaying of age' develops over the years and to identify the reasons for Alberto's decision to eventually give up his adolescent lifestyle. An important point of discussion will be the relationship between Alberto and his family, especially the mother as a central figure in the protagonist's life. Finally, in the last section, I will investigate the role of women in the protagonist's definition of his self-identity. I will underline the importance of pornography as a substitute for couple relationships and the development of new forms of intimacy in which traditional and postmodern values are constantly opposed.

Delaying of Age as Prolonged Adolescence

In analysing Culicchia's *Ameni inganni*, I will start making reference to the main theme which connects the three narrative texts in this chapter. Whereas in the previous chapter, I focused on a generational 'delaying of age' as the response to social change, here I am analysing the consequences of this change on the individual. More specifically, I intend to pay attention to the way in which the 'delaying of age' process loses its generational and communitarian character to become a personal strategy and an individual way of opposing society. In Tondelli's *Camere separate*, normativity was associated with hetero- and

volontariamente Alberto e dall'altro è anche catastrofico, perché mette in discussione tutto il castello di finte certezze che lui si era costruito'. Interview with Giuseppe Culicchia, 'Intervista a Giuseppe Culicchia, Torino, Fiera del libro 2011', Il Tascapane
< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wySSbAsnraw> > [accessed 1 October 2012].

homonormativity, because the protagonist's delaying of age was his way of negotiating his sexual identity within society. In Culicchia's first novel, *Tutti giù per terra*, Walter delays his coming of age because he is afraid of a precarious future in which the work environment and love relationships are unstable. Finally, in *Ameni inganni*, the 'delaying of age' is developed in a more extreme manner, becoming a real retreat into adolescence. If in the previous novels the protagonists wished to be able to avoid adult responsibilities and the coming of age, in this text real life is negated and delaying his coming of age for Alberto means to build up a parallel life in which responsibilities do not exist and in which it is possible to avoid adulthood. More specifically, as in the previous novels, for the male protagonist of *Ameni inganni* delaying his age is a matter of reacting to a difficult and unwelcoming social environment. Alberto's parallel life is also a sign of his dubious mental health, as several events in the text will show; however, despite the specificity of this situation, I would argue that Culicchia's fictional protagonist should be considered as representing another facet of the 'delaying of age' strategy.

In this section, I will focus on Alberto's life until his casual encounter with his former girlfriend Letizia twenty-one years after they broke up: this is the period I would define as 'delaying of age'. However, another watershed moment in Alberto's life is represented by his mother's death a few weeks before. This moment is central in understanding the protagonist's retreat into adolescence as a way of preserving his relationship with his mother. Since the funeral of his grandmother when he was five years old, Alberto has been obsessed with the fear of seeing his mother die. To contrast the pervasiveness of this fear, Alberto finds a refuge in an adolescent yet obsessive behaviour, devoting himself to compulsive passions, such as the building of spaceship models and the reading of soft porn magazines. Hence, Alberto summarises his life:

Ecco: sono trentasei anni che aspetto il funerale di mia madre. E ora, finalmente, ci siamo. Da bambino e poi anche in seguito, non sono mai riuscito neppure a sfiorare l'idea che un giorno avrei dovuto fare i conti con tutto questo. [...] Ma pur costringendomi a non pensare che un giorno anche mia madre sarebbe morta, come prima di lei mio padre e i miei nonni, il pensiero della sua scomparsa è sempre stato presente sullo sfondo dei miei giorni e delle mie notti. E così, giorno dopo giorno e notte dopo notte, la mia mente è stata obbligata a concentrarsi sempre più sia sulle astronavi sia sulle riviste porno. So tutto quel che c'è da sapere, in fatto di astronavi e di riviste

porno. Le astronavi e le riviste porno mi hanno accompagnato e in un certo senso aiutato in tutti questi anni.⁶²

The relationship between Alberto and his mother is fundamental in influencing his personality and his development as a man; more specifically, I would argue that the mother-son bond plays an important role in shaping the protagonist's relationships with women and, as a consequence, in contributing to his gender identification. The mother-son/daughter identification is, according to Freud, the relationship which a child develops with his/her first love object. In order to develop a heterosexual character, the male child has to identify with his father and to transfer his desire (libido) for his mother to other women. Freud considers boys to be at an advantage over girls because their primary love object is heterosexual (the mother). However, other scholars have criticised Freud's approach for being based on anatomy rather than identity; in fact, if we look at the boy's development from a gender identity point of view, it seems that the boy experiences more difficulties in establishing his gender identity, since '[i]n order for him to establish masculinity he must first dis-identify from his mother, and then identify with his father'.⁶³ Therefore, the identification with the mother in the first year of a male child's life has to be interrupted in order to allow the boy to shape his masculinity following appropriate gender models. In her study of the influence of parental relationships in the shaping of one's gender identity, Nancy Chodorow makes an interesting distinction between girls' and boys' mode of gender development and identification: according to the feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst, 'masculine identification [...] is predominantly a gender role identification. By contrast, feminine identification is predominantly *parental*'.⁶⁴ In David Lynn's words, thus, '[m]ales tend to identify with a cultural stereotype of the masculine role; whereas females tend to identify with aspects of their own mother's role specifically'.⁶⁵ Especially in a fatherless family environment, the young man has to identify with male role models who are external to family relations and, in order to grow up, he has to

⁶² Giuseppe Culicchia, *Ameni inganni* (Milan: Mondadori, 2011), pp. 9–10. All the references to Culicchia's *Ameni inganni* are from this edition.

⁶³ Robert Stoller, *The Transsexual Experiment* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975). Cited in Thomas J. Ryan, 'Roots of Masculinity', in *The Sexuality of Men*, ed. by Andy Metcalf and Martin Humphries (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 15–27 (p. 20).

⁶⁴ Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 176.

⁶⁵ David Lynn, 'A Note on Sex Differences in the Development of Masculine and Feminine Identification', *Psychological Review*, 66 (1959), 126–35 (p. 130).

learn to dis-identify with his mother. This ideal situation, according to psychoanalysis, has to take place during the male child's transition from childhood to adulthood and, if not completed, can cause the young man psychological problems. In the light of these ideas, I would argue that in Culicchia's *Ameni inganni*, the protagonist seems to suffer from a difficult detachment from his mother and, consequently, to look for constant approval from her. I have already underlined how the thought of his mother's death has accompanied Alberto during almost his whole life: the novel's very first scene describes the mother's funeral, and from a narrative point of view works as a watershed in the protagonist's life. If we think of this novel as deriving from the *Bildungsroman* genre, the death of Alberto's mother severs every connection between the man and his family of origin, potentially providing him with the opportunity to liberate himself from his condition and to come of age within society. However, this tragic event does not affect the mother-son bond, since it just moves it to a different level, to the unreal world in which the protagonist lives his daily life. Furthermore, it does not offer a chance for change; in fact it worsens the protagonist's solitude and his retreat from reality thanks to the delaying of his adulthood. The failed dis-identification with and independence from the maternal figure, then, might be to blame for Alberto's lack of 'real' sexual and romantic relationships. If gender identity is shaped in the relationship with others, the only 'others' Alberto has a relationship with are – at the beginning of the novel – his mother and his imagined women, girls from soft porn magazines, or Olga, the Russian model he follows on Twitter.

From this perspective, Alberto's fear of having a relationship with a woman in real life might also be interpreted as a consequence of his dependence on his mother: in the case of cross-identification with the mother, Ryan explains, it is possible for men to fear commitment, which, in some cases, 'is manifested by complete exclusion of the woman from their lives or in less extreme cases the man may behave in ways to curtail, control or distance himself within the relationship'⁶⁶ in order to preserve his male identity and to impose control on women. As I will show in the next section, Alberto's obsession with pornography is his way of affirming his male identity and of exerting control on relationships with women which, otherwise, would be too

⁶⁶ Ryan, *Roots of Masculinity*, pp. 21–22.

intimidating. The encounter with Letizia will provide him with the opportunity to finally try and accomplish his coming of age in the real world; however, it will turn out to be an attempt to fulfil his need for dependence on another female figure.

Romantic Relationships: Real and Unreal Women

As in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, romantic relationships have been a pivotal phase in the process of coming of age of the male protagonists analysed in this work. Other than offering the opportunity for them to enter society and start a family, I would argue that hetero- and homosexual relationships have also played an important role in shaping young men's gender identities. The relationship with the 'other' – in the peer group or in the couple – remains, therefore, the core of one's coming of age in postmodernity, despite the changes this relationship has undergone over the decades. I have shown, indeed, an array of transformations of the 'original' couple relationship which, traditionally, was supposed to lead the male protagonist to marriage and to the formation of a family. In this last case study, I am focusing on another facet of the development of romantic relationships: the replacement of real women with imagined women thanks to pornography and virtual relationships. In this section, I will analyse the role of pornography in defining gender identity and as a substitute for romantic and sexual relationships, highlighting its centrality in the 'delaying of age' process. Alberto was unable to establish strong relationships with women during his youth: his only romantic relationship with Letizia, his classmate, lasted two years and ended when he refused to move in with her, during the first years of university, for fear of committing and, more importantly, of leaving his family. As I have already underlined, a strong attachment to the mother could be to blame for Alberto's inability to successfully communicate and develop a relationship with a woman; however, it is important to notice here that Alberto's decision to avoid social life and to retreat into the virtual world of pornography and spaceship models is a conscious choice. Alberto's 'delaying of age', in this sense, can be interpreted as a way of preserving his infant dependence upon his mother: a strategy which leads him to avoid all those formative steps which normally characterise a young man's coming of age. A few examples from the novel will help to clarify my argument: when, more than

twenty years after their break-up, Alberto meets Letizia, he realises that this is his only opportunity to break free from the solitude in which he has lived after the death of his mother, the only 'real' person he ever had a relationship with. Alberto is aware of being on the verge of a radical change in his life: on the one hand, there is the prospect of a lonely life and the risk of transforming his obsession into a more serious mental health issue or, more extremely, of dying alone;⁶⁷ on the other hand, the final freedom from the mother-son bond which has kept him trapped in his adolescence so far could allow him to finally come of age:

riflettevo sul fatto che da una settimana a questa parte, ovvero dopo la morte di mia madre, ho aperto bocca soltanto oggi, con l'edicolante. Quante volte mi sono detto che prima o poi ciò a cui mi impedivo di pensare sarebbe successo, e che una volta rimasto solo avrei dovuto trovare una soluzione? Non voglio certo fare la fine di quei fuori di testa che girano per strada parlando ad alta voce, e nemmeno mettermi a chiacchierare con gli edicolanti. Anche perché poi non potrei più sperare che non mi riconoscano quando vado a comprare le riviste. Lo so, se lavorassi sarebbe diverso. Mia madre me lo ripeteva sempre. Trovati un lavoro, anziché continuare a montare astronavi. Già non hai finito l'università, anche se avevi tutti trenta e lode. Magari sul lavoro conosci qualche ragazza. Ci esci la sera, ci vai in vacanza, e se vi trovate bene te la sposi. Così poi mi date un nipotino'.⁶⁸

The second option – the final coming of age – seems to suddenly become possible when Alberto meets his former girlfriend by chance. It is interesting to notice the circumstances which led to their reunion, since they shed further light on Alberto's attempt to establish a relationship with women: the two protagonists meet by chance when Alberto decides to visit women who advertise their houses for sale in the local newspaper. By pretending to be interested in buying their houses – another of his *ameni inganni* – Alberto attempts to merge the sexual imaginary world from his soft porn magazines with the real women he meets during his visits: the result being a series of fantasies about these women which follow the standard requirements of pornographic

⁶⁷ Throughout the text, Alberto expresses his fears at the idea of dying alone, especially when he reads about how easy it can be for a lonely person to suddenly disappear from society, to die without anybody knowing (see pp. 101, 189). Furthermore, he realises that, after the death of his mother, his life has become even more solitary and detached from reality: 'contrariamente a quanto avevo sempre ritenuto, dalla morte di mia madre sono già trascorse due settimane, eppure io sono ancora vivo. Da bambino ero sicuro che non sarei mai stato in grado di sopravvivere a mia madre. E questa certezza mi ha accompagnato per tutta l'esistenza. Ora invece so di essermi sbagliato. Sempre che la mia si possa definire vita' (p. 51).

⁶⁸ Culicchia, *Ameni inganni*, p. 30.

magazines photo shots.⁶⁹ Living in the virtual life he has created for himself is for Alberto a way to oppose the requirements imposed by family and society, of shaping his personality and behaviour against what society expects him to be; however, he is aware of not being able to comply with social expectations – of not having completed his coming of age process in a traditional sense – and needs a reason to change his life course.⁷⁰ After their first accidental reunion, Alberto decides to invite Letizia out for a coffee and the two start to see each other as friends; however, Alberto interprets Letizia's friendship as the sign she still has feelings for him. Alberto's imagined world takes over the real world: seeing Letizia as his only chance to be rescued from his 'delaying of age' and, finally, to come of age, Alberto decides to invent a life with her, in which she returns his love, they are planning to get married, and she is pregnant with his child. Alberto is not able to avoid those *ameni inganni* which have been part of his whole life and fails in his only opportunity to finally integrate within society. In the novel's last scene it is clear that Alberto is doomed to return to the 'delaying of age' phase, to his imaginary world, since his attempt to grow up and adapt to society has failed: Letizia, who finally finds out about his deception, denounces him to the police, resulting in Alberto being put under house arrest for stalking. Alberto returns to his lonely life and to his obsessions – to his prison –⁷¹ with the fear of dying alone. After having put an advertisement in the local newspaper to sell the lower floor of his house, he has to spend his time at home under house arrest. Culicchia closes the novel with a rather dark image, implying that the isolation in which Alberto is forced to live – and which he has caused – will lead him to become the protagonist of one of his most dreadful fears, dying alone:

Ma adesso basta. Devo smettere di pensare. Soprattutto a quell'articolo di giornale. Sono giorni e notti che mi ossessiona. *Uomo di quarant'anni trovato morto per caso...* era una persona molto riservata... nessuno si è insospettito perché a volte non lo si incrociava per settimane... probabilmente era morto da mesi... nessun segno di violenza... non aveva né parenti né amici... e poi quella parola... *mummificato*... Basta, Alberto. Basta. Basta. Basta.

⁶⁹ See Culicchia, *Ameni inganni*, pp. 42, 53.

⁷⁰ Thus, Alberto reflects: 'Se mi trovo qui in questo momento, mi dico, è perché non ho mai messo piede in una discoteca. So che esistono bar e locali dove si possono conoscere ragazze davanti a un aperitivo, ma non li frequento. So anche che un mucchio di persone si conoscono in chat o appunto su Facebook, il più delle volte spacciandosi per qualcosa che non sono, salvo poi deludere le aspettative di chi infine accetta di incontrarle nella vita reale. Se mi trovo qui è perché non ho una vita reale' (p. 43).

⁷¹ "Finirò in prigione?" non riesco a trattenermi dal chiedergli. E, proprio mentre glielo chiedo, mi viene da pensare che in fin dei conti... ci sono già' (p. 202).

L'annuncio l'ho messo un mese fa. Per il momento, non si è ancora visto nessuno. A ogni modo ne sono sicuro. Nel peggiore dei casi qualcuno verrà. Un giorno, per caso.⁷²

This brief summary should give an idea of the plot and the characters of Culicchia's novel: it also highlights the principal aspects of the protagonist's identity, making clear his uniqueness. As I have already highlighted, each novel analysed in this work presents a different facet of the evolution of the coming of age process in contemporary Italy: despite sharing recurring themes and topoi, these texts describe very specific situations and each author has his personal take on the literary genre and, more generally, on the representation of fictional identities. Therefore, before continuing my analysis of this last novel, I would like to acknowledge the specificity of Alberto's character, with his pathological behaviours and his being torn between a desire for normality and his psychopathic tendencies. If these characteristics mark this fictional character's distinct individuality, they do not prevent us from considering, more generally, Alberto as representative of a real tendency or threat within contemporary society. In other words, as Culicchia himself has also explained, the protagonist of *Ameni inganni* stands as an example of the risks people could incur in our globalised and increasingly virtual world. Despite his extreme characterisation, typical of Culicchia's narrative style, I would argue that the male protagonist of this text symbolises the fragility of contemporary adult men, casting light on their insecurity in their relationships with women and on their fears, especially their need for care and protection from solitude. This is not to say that men's lives in contemporary Italy mirror Alberto's life, since I do not intend to underestimate individuals' differences or generalise my assumptions by speaking of homogeneous male models and roles which can easily fit Italian men. My attempt is, on the contrary, to highlight general trends in the evolution of the coming of age process for young and adult men, noting different patterns and modalities, but avoiding any categorisation of men in specific roles and models and acknowledging their differences.

After having explicated my approach, I will now turn to the last section of my analysis, focusing on the role of women in the process of delaying/coming of age of Culicchia's male protagonist. Alberto's fear of relationships and, more generally, of women can be traced back to his youth and his first encounter with

⁷² Culicchia, *Ameni inganni*, p. 211.

adult responsibilities when Letizia asks him to move in with her.⁷³ After the accidental encounter with her, Alberto reflects on his past:

Non ci posso credere. Tra tutte le case e gli appartamenti e le mansarde e i loft e le ville e i pied-à-terre e i garage in vendita dovevo beccare proprio il suo trilocale, che sfiga. Una buffa coincidenza, l'ha chiamata lei. La mia prima e sola e unica ragazza. La ragazza con cui per la prima e sola e unica volta ho fatto l'amore. La ragazza che prima e sola e unica mi ha chiesto ventun anni fa di andare a vivere con lei. La ragazza a cui ho detto di no perché... [...] perché non ho avuto il coraggio di farlo... perché ho avuto paura... una paura totale... nera... che mi rosicchiava dentro... paura di dirlo ai miei... paura di andarmene di casa... paura di vedersi spalancare davanti a me una vita nuova... che non conoscevo... paura perché non sapevo da che parte cominciare... paura perché sapevo come sarebbe finita... paura di svegliarmi ogni mattina con lei accanto a me in un letto... paura di vedere accanto al mio il suo spazzolino... paura di sentirmi dire: dove andiamo in vacanza?... paura di sentirmi dire: che ne dici, non credi che sia arrivata l'ora di sposarci?... paura di incrociare i suoi occhi una domenica pomeriggio e indovinare la sua prossima domanda... non credi sia arrivata l'ora di fare un figlio?⁷⁴

Fear of commitment is the cause of Alberto's delaying of age and retreat into his adolescent world, after the break-up with Letizia: if the reunion seems, at first sight, bad luck for Alberto, it then turns out to be his only chance to change his life and re-start his process of coming of age which, after the break-up, he has postponed indefinitely. Alberto has been faithful to Letizia during the twenty-one years of their break-up and he interprets Letizia's renewed friendship as the signal of their reconciliation and, furthermore, of her mutual love. Despite Letizia's attempts to dismiss the importance of their relationship, calling it a 'cottarella adolescenziale', Alberto is keen to demonstrate the opposite, using his imagination and inventing a successful life for himself – 'Sono il... responsabile per l'Italia di Twitter',⁷⁵ he lies to Letizia – and a rosy future together with Letizia. Thus, in one of the conversations he has with his mother at her grave, he describes his imaginary romantic relationship:

Ciao mamma. Come stai? [...] Scusami se non sono venuto prima. [...] E' solo che ho avuto parecchio da fare in queste settimane. Sai, tra le altre cose ho incontrato quella mia vecchia compagna di scuola. Letizia. La mia prima e sola e unica ragazza, ricordi? Be', non ci crederai ma... ci siamo di nuovo innamorati l'uno dell'altra. Cioè, io lo sono sempre stato. Ma ora, dopo una

⁷³ Furthermore, my analysis of Alberto's fear of commitment and his relationship with his mother needs to be analysed against the background of the Italian phenomenon of *mammismo*, which is outlined in Chapter Two.

⁷⁴ Culicchia, *Ameni inganni*, pp. 71–72.

⁷⁵ Culicchia, *Ameni inganni*, p. 70.

comprensibile esitazione iniziale, anche perché erano ventun anni che non ci vedevamo, lo è di nuovo anche lei. E... non è la sola buona notizia che ho da darti. Perché... io e lei... sì, insomma, aspettiamo un bambino. [...] Com'è successo? Dài, mamma, non farmi domande imbarazzanti. Vabbè, siamo andati assieme a un concerto. Sì, un concerto. No, non abbiamo corso alcun rischio. E proprio quella sera... è capitato. Sì, certo, io e Letizia naturalmente ci sposeremo'. (pp. 159–60)

It is interesting to notice how in the development of his imaginary romantic relationship with Letizia, Alberto adopts a traditional model of couple relationships which expects the two lovers to get married in anticipation of the child's arrival. Furthermore, his increasing affection for his ex-girlfriend leads him to get rid of both his soft porn magazines (nonetheless scanning the girls' photos to keep them saved on his computer) and spaceship models, proving his willingness to abandon his 'delaying of age' phase to conform to society's expectations:

Per la prima volta da una vita, mi sento davvero bene, in pace col mondo. Per dire: non avrei mai immaginato di riuscire un giorno ad addormentarmi senza la mia collezione di astronavi. Certo, il fatto di conservare le ragazze delle riviste nell'hard disk del computer mi sta aiutando parecchio. Ma chissà, forse presto non avrò più nemmeno bisogno di loro. (p. 163)

Pornography plays an important role in Alberto's life, one of his obsessions since his youth which provides him with an easier way to relate with women. In the analysis of *Paso Doble*, I have highlighted the changes undergone in the couple relationship format: despite dreaming of a romantic love story and waiting for true love, Walter has to renounce his aspirations and finds an easier way to satisfy his sexual desire with pornography. Pornography returns as a central theme in *Ameni inganni* but, other than the consequence of the failure of a romantic ideal, here it is a replacement of this ideal. One of the key elements of pornography is women's objectification and their transformation from subjects with their own agency to objects, acting in order to satisfy men's desire. Keeping this in mind, pornography becomes, in this case, a way for Alberto to deal with his commitment issues and, at the same time, to impose himself and his masculinity on women in a way that has always been precluded to him. In other words, I would argue that pornography allows a space for the definition of identity in terms of masculine desire and agency which does not seem possible in the 'real' world. By giving Alberto the possibility to establish a

relationship with the women represented in the soft porn magazines he reads – ‘le sole ragazze con cui mi confidassi e che mi capissero’ (p. 130) – pornography secures male identity around the idea of women’s complicity.

Furthermore, I would argue that pornography allows a potential for reintroducing a traditional structure in couple relationships: more specifically, through pornography, men can assert their masculinity and find confirmation of their power over women. If changes in gender roles have contributed to jeopardising male predominance in society, pornography creates a parallel world, it ‘asserts itself as a domain separate from the everyday world, or as a window on to a realm of the purely sexual’, providing a reassuring environment in which ‘[t]he male reader is [...] welcomed as a member of the brotherhood of all men’ and he ‘is confirmed in his masculinity; he is normal, healthy and in control’.⁷⁶ In analysing the role of pornography in Alberto’s life, I would argue that reading soft porn magazines is, for the protagonist, a way of establishing relationships with women that, in real life, would be forbidden by his fear of commitment and by his insecurity. By being able to control women’s power through their objectification, Alberto can confirm his male identity and define his role as a man; however, I would suggest that while pornography provides him with the possibility of shaping his sexuality and his gender identity, it also secludes him in a separate world. In other words, Alberto is trapped in his ‘delaying of age’ phase and only the encounter with Letizia will offer him his final opportunity to come of age and to leave his parallel world. I would also argue that Alberto’s obsession with Letizia and his attempt to start a family with her is a symptom of his need to replace his mother as a powerful female figure in his life. The contrast between pornography and romantic love in the text in terms of intimacy and commitment is also worth analysis. If the male protagonist’s relationships with women are anxiety-ridden, leading him to avoid them, it is interesting to notice that, in the relationship with Letizia, Alberto seems to desire the intimacy that he has so far avoided, imagining that he is about to marry his ex-girlfriend and to start a family with her. However, I would suggest that his fear of intimacy and his detachment from heterosexual relationships remains unchanged: if in pornographic magazines, ‘female sexuality is neutralised, and the threat of intimacy dissolved’,⁷⁷ Alberto applies

⁷⁶ Moye, *Pornography*, pp. 52–53.

⁷⁷ Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 119.

the same parameters to his relationship with Letizia, voiding her desire – or, better, her refusal – and constructing a parallel, unreal, scenario. Furthermore, according to Feona Attwood, in pornography ‘sexuality is divorced from reproduction, becoming primarily an expression of individuality, a form of recreation and a means of constructing intimate, though not necessarily long-lasting relationships’.⁷⁸ In this sense, pornography offers Alberto a model for male sexuality which he transposes to his only romantic relationship with Letizia. If pornography is sexuality without reproduction, the relationship with Letizia should be, in Alberto’s imaginary ideal world, reproduction without sexuality: a way of satisfying his mother’s desire to see him finally coming of age and, at the same time, avoiding the intimacy of a sexual relationship. While analysing the role of pornography in contemporary society, Giddens has maintained that couple relationships have been subjected to a historical change towards an ‘episodic’ sexuality, in which long-term relationships lose their value and sexual relationships imply men’s avoidance of intimacy and focus on sexual pleasure. Soft porn magazines recall exactly this scenario, representing an episodic and hedonistic sexuality for their readers. In the case of Alberto’s relationships with women, the centrality of pornography is undoubted, yet it also comes into conflict with the traditional model of the couple relationship which he attempts to establish with Letizia. On the one hand there is the avoidance of intimacy which, as I have already argued, affects the way in which Alberto structures his imaginary romantic relationship and which leads to the potential creation of a family without the ‘burden’ of sexuality. On the other hand, there is the need for a more stable couple relationship, according to the traditional idea of romantic relationship, which Alberto’s mother expected him to conform to.

It is interesting to read the dualism in the representation of women in this novel with reference to what has been called ‘strategy of debasement’ in psychoanalysis: at the basis of the mother/whore split, this strategy implies, according to Freud, a systematic debasement of the object of sexual attraction in order to make the sexual relationship possible for a man.⁷⁹ More specifically, Freud identifies two currents which have to coexist in a well-developed and

⁷⁸ Feona Attwood, “‘Tits and Ass and Porn and Fighting’: Male Heterosexuality in Magazines for Men”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8 (2005), 83–100 (p. 95).

⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘On The Universal Tendency To Debasement in the Sphere of Love’, in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. by Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 247–60.

'normal' (in Freud's words) sexual and romantic relationship: the affectionate and the sensual current. The former is present in the individual from childhood and it is directed to the child's primary love object, usually his mother or the person who takes care of him. It is during puberty that the sensual current starts to manifest itself along with the affectionate current: 'the sensual current', Freud explains, 'seeks only objects which do not recall the incestuous figures forbidden to it' (Freud, p. 252), and has to overlap with the affectionate current. When this does not happen, the male subject is unable to perform sexually with his designated love object (usually the wife):

The whole sphere of love in such people remains divided in the two directions personified in art as sacred and profane (animal) love. Where they love they do not desire and where they desire they do not love. (Freud, p. 252)

Freud, thus, explains that the only way to overcome this psychological problem is 'a psychical debasement of the sexual object', making the man need, in order to support his sexual identity, 'a woman who is ethically inferior, to whom he need attribute no aesthetic scruples, who does not know him in his other social relations and cannot judge him in them' (Freud, pp. 252–5). Similarly, in *Ameni inganni*, Alberto is split between the love for Letizia and the sexual attraction for the women in the porn magazines: his affectionate and sexual currents do not coexist in the same woman, but love and sexuality are kept apart. Alberto's inability to establish a relationship with a woman, then, might be read as an unconscious form of defence of his love for his primary love object, his mother. I have analysed above the mother-son bond and its development in Culicchia's novel: after the death of his mother, I argued, Alberto had to find a new woman on which to be dependent and Letizia, I would suggest, symbolically replaced the mother for Alberto.

In conclusion, Alberto's definition of his male identity is shaped by two main symbolic systems which offer him models of masculinity and heterosexuality: the sexualised imagery of pornography and the institutionalised imagery of sexual relationships offered by society. The former, with its idea of sexuality as connected to women's objectification, provides him with the possibility to control women and to define his masculinity in terms of sexual desire, yet it also works as a substitute for romantic relationships during Alberto's 'delaying of age' phase. Traditional sexual and romantic relationships

– advocated by Alberto's mother for her son – expect him to conform to a traditional lifestyle, to be able to perform his masculinity within a familial context, as husband and father, and clearly fail to encompass Alberto's diversity and individuality. In response to the pressure exerted by society, Alberto is forced to lie to others, but, first of all, to himself, as a way to shape his identity according to society's pressure, leading him to an impossible coming of age.

Conclusion – An Impossible Coming of Age?

In this chapter, I have looked at the coming of age narrative from a different perspective: instead of analysing it from a generational point of view, my focus was directed on the relationships that the male protagonists in the three novels established with 'others'. I identified two main relationships: the bond with the family of origin and romantic and sexual relationships. Both, I would suggest, were equally important because, as I found out in my analysis, they both contributed to shaping the protagonists' gender and sexual identity in the process of coming of age. Both, at the same time, were also seen as impediments to a fully accomplished path of maturation.

In general, the role of the family has been a controversial one: on the one hand, I have argued that the family is often seen as an unwelcoming place, for parental figures find it difficult to support their sons in their process of identification. This is clearly visible in Tondelli's *Camere separate*, where Leo is not able to articulate his homosexuality (and his mourning for the death of Thomas) with his parents, and in Culicchia's *Tutti giù per terra*, where the father is described not only as unsupportive, but also as a coercive man, who is frustrated by his son's refusal to follow in his footsteps. Alberto's relationship with his mother, in *Ameni inganni*, might seem a peaceful one, since there is no apparent tension between the two characters; however, it appears, instead, to be destructive, inasmuch as it deeply affects Alberto's future relationships with women and his very possibility of coming of age. However, it has to be acknowledged that this last novel depicts a very different situation, one in which the parent figure (the mother, in this case) is not the one to blame for the son's 'delaying of age'. In fact, Culicchia engages, in this novel, with the phenomenon of *mammismo*: Alberto, as we have seen, is a mummy's boy, because he is afraid to leave the parental house and start his own life. *Mammismo* and its

effects on Italian society have been analysed in Chapter Two: a state of dependence on the family of origin, it might be caused by financial reasons (the inability to afford to live away from home) and/or emotional attachment. Both Walter and Alberto could have good reasons to become *mammoni*: the former is extremely poor and, at least at the beginning of *Tutti giù per terra*, does not have a paid job to support himself; the latter has a strong emotional dependence on his mother. Interestingly, however, Culicchia decides to deal with *mammismo* in *Ameni inganni*, implicitly connecting the phenomenon, I would argue, to its emotional roots, to the mother-son bond which is often used as a stereotype of Italian society and the family. I would suggest that Culicchia's engagement with this problematic issue, along with the narrative style through which he represents it – irony and exaggeration – represent the writer's ironic take on the topic. *Ameni inganni*'s representation of the *mammone*, therefore, is Culicchia's way of mocking our obsession with and the moral panic that Italian (and European) media have created around the phenomenon of *mammismo*.

In conclusion, the 'delaying of age' phase (as an Italian response to the coming of age pattern) represented in the three novels analysed in this chapter does not lead the protagonist towards a successful final transition towards adulthood. On the contrary, these men seem unable to fulfil their expectations and their process of identification. Whereas Leo, in *Camere separate*, partially wins his 'fight' with heteronormative society by finding in the process of writing the power to represent his homosexual identity and to overcome the impossibility of homosexual love, Walter's artistic maturation is a total failure and, despite his refusal, the young man is soon overcome by society and gives in to adapt to postmodern society's rules. Furthermore, Alberto, in *Ameni inganni*, loses his last chance to come of age and to become a responsible member of society, by creating a family with Letizia, preferring his fantasy world to the responsibilities and the commitment that being an adult implies.

Conclusion

The Coming of Age Narrative in Contemporary Italian Literature

This work has aimed to provide a new perspective from which to read the *Bildungsroman* narrative in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Italian literature, one which questions the validity of the traditional 'coming of age' process in an age of great uncertainty for young people. Reflecting on the social and cultural environment in which the younger generations of the last thirty years have had to begin their transition towards adulthood, it has become clear that the traditional model of identity maturation narrated by the German literary genre could no longer effectively represent the dynamics of growing up in postmodern society. This research started with a precise, yet very complex set of questions: to what extent is it still possible to speak of a legacy of the *Bildungsroman* in contemporary Italian literature? What are the elements in common with and where does contemporary narrative deviate from the traditional model? What does becoming a man mean – and imply – in the Italian society of the last thirty years and how is the young men's process of identification represented by the new wave of writers who have engaged with the genre from the 1980s to the present? By looking at the novels of three contemporary Italian writers, I proposed to disentangle this convoluted knot of reflections and to systematically analyse the representation of the coming of age process not only against the backdrop of the traditional literary genre, but also in an ongoing dialogue with the cultural and social milieu in which the narrative works are set and which has influenced the writers' own work.

To answer these research questions, I had to trace the origins of the *Bildungsroman* and highlight its trademarks, those phases of the process of coming of age which are part and parcel of the traditional genre. Furthermore, I looked at the representation of youth in Italian contemporary narrative, identifying on the one hand a continuity of the genre, but, on the other hand, the inevitably changed format that this genre had to follow in postmodern society in order to narrate youth conditions. This was particularly evident in Chapter Two, where I focused my attention on the social and cultural changes affecting young people since the aftermath of the Second World War, providing a basis for my analysis of the primary sources in the following chapters. What has become

clear from this work is that, despite writers' engagement with the *Bildungsroman* model, it is no longer possible, in contemporary Italian narrative, to represent the growing up process as a linear path, which follows a series of predetermined steps and stages. On the contrary, uncertainty and *precarietà* are the keywords of a new development of the literary genre, in which, instead of coming of age, the young man seems to delay his entry into society and postpone adult responsibilities. In Chapter Two, I identified several problematic areas in Italian society that could be considered responsible for this paradigm shift: the unproblematic transition from the family of origin to the creation of a new familial context represented in traditional narrative patterns do not find an adequate counterpart in a contemporary society in which young people are often penalised by an unstable work environment and a consequent complex relationship between the desire to become an adult and a welfare system which seems to fail their aspirations.

The analysis of the novels in Chapters Three and Four relied on a comparative approach between traditional forms of coming of age and the re-elaboration of the genre by Tondelli, Veronesi, and Culicchia, in order to bring to the fore shared narrative patterns and highlight their variations. In general, I identified three main elements/steps of the *Bildungsroman* genre in the novels analysed: the journey *topos*, the relationship with the family of origin, and the creation of a romantic relationship. The journey, in the traditional examples of the literary genre, was a fundamental phase of the young protagonist's life, because it enabled him to gain experience of the outside world as part of his process of coming of age and to become, in the end, a knowledgeable man, perfectly integrated within his community.

In Tondelli's *Altri libertini* and *Camere separate*, the journey *topos* is indeed very central and characterises the narrative path of the protagonists. The episode from *Altri libertini* analysed in Chapter Three, 'Viaggio' (The Journey) is indeed the story of a double journey: the real one – in northern Europe – and the metaphorical one, the path of maturation undertaken by the young protagonist and his friends. This double meaning of the journey returns in *Camere separate* (Chapter Four), where the protagonist Leo decides to travel round Europe in order to make sense of the loss of his lover and, symbolically and more generally, to make sense of his homosexual identity. In both these works, the journey takes on two main meanings which, apparently, seem to

restore the traditional configuration it had in the *Bildungsroman*: on the one hand, it is an exploration of the world that allows the protagonist to gain experience and on the other hand, it works as an internal process of formation for the young man. If we compare this *topos* with its use in the *Bildungsroman* narrative, it is clear, however, that the journey could no longer play the same role in the young protagonist's process of coming of age. Despite retaining the meaning of clarifying the protagonist's identity, the journey, in Tondelli's novels, does not prepare him to become a valuable member of adult society. On the contrary, the journey is an escape from the perspective of becoming part of that society. More specifically, in *Altri libertini* the journey becomes a generational experience: exploring northern Europe acquires a mythical aura – it is the objective of many young men and women in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Furthermore, embarking upon such a journey was, for the protagonists, a way to freely experience their sexuality, to see their homosexuality validated within their generational group. The way in which the journey trope is represented in Tondelli's narrative casts lights on an important feature of the 'delaying of age' narrative: the importance of the generational group of peers in the process of identification of the young man. In *Camere separate*, the journey is connected to the process of identification, inasmuch as it helps the protagonist overcome the death of his lover Thomas and, more generally, experience his homosexuality. In contemporary Italian narrative, therefore, the journey seems to have lost its traditional link with apprenticeship: despite still being an important step in the protagonists' lives, it no longer aims to prepare them for adulthood, but enables a 'search for identity' which, in Tondelli's case, is connected with sexuality.

The journey trope is also developed in Culicchia's *Paso Doble*, analysed, together with *Tutti giù per terra*, in Chapter Four. The novel, written and set more than ten years after *Altri libertini*, also explores the theme of journey to northern Europe: however, the way the protagonist experiences it is very different from the liberating process implied in the journey narrated by Tondelli. In this novel, Walter, the protagonist, is torn between a desire for changing the world in which he lives – a nostalgia for the 1970s – and the necessity to adapt to society. His travelling towards northern Europe is his last – doomed – chance to avoid integration within society.

Seen as a source of support and as the place in which to gain the confidence to face the adult world, the family of origin is, in the *Bildungsroman*, also the place that the young man has to leave in order to complete his process of coming of age. The relationship between the protagonist and his family seems to be less relevant for his maturation: in Chapter Three, the generational mode of coming of age which links Tondelli's *Altri libertini*, Veronesi's *Gli sfiorati*, and Culicchia's *Brucia la città* systematically excludes adult figures from the process of maturation undergone by the young. More specifically, since young people seek validation of their identity within the group of peers, parental figures are no longer helpful: they represent that adult world that the protagonists challenge and often symbolise all the negative qualities of becoming an adult. Furthermore, fathers and mothers in these novels lose the power that traditionally allows them to influence and/or direct their sons' transition towards adulthood. No longer role models for young people, parents – and more generally adults – become mostly invisible in these novels. In *Altri libertini*, the younger generation is marginalised by society and, therefore, lives totally apart from the older generation of fathers: there is no longer a traditional transition from youth to adulthood, but the process of identification takes place within the generational group, in which older and more experienced members become leading role models (the Regime of Brothers). *Gli sfiorati* narrates a relationship between father and son which develops along the lines of an Oedipal configuration; however, the father-son bond is here substituted by a male friendship. In *Brucia la città*, *Tutti giù per terra*, and *Paso Doble*, adult figures play the role of negative models for young people: models that in *Brucia la città* are followed by the younger generation, while they are rejected by Walter in *Tutti giù per terra*. Lastly, in *Ameni inganni*, Culicchia engages with the national phenomenon of *mammismo*, ironically exploring the 'dangers' of the mother-son bond.

Finally, another element considered in this work is the establishment of a romantic relationship that, in the *Bildungsroman*, was completed by marriage and the consequent creation of a new family. Since the 'delaying of age' narrative deals with the phenomenon of the postponement of adulthood, it is clear that marriage – the successful exit from the family of origin in the archetype of the genre – is no longer a pivotal phase of these novels. However, romantic relationships are indeed a fundamental element of the process of

identification of the male protagonists, especially in terms of gender identity. Becoming men, therefore, is for them a matter of negotiating their identity with women or men in a homosexual relationship, as in *Altri libertini* and *Camere separate*. In Chapter Three, the generational 'delaying of age', which characterises the three novels under analysis, affects the way in which romantic relationships are developed inasmuch as it makes them part of the generational process of identity acquisition. In other words, gender identity and sexuality are always validated within the group of peers: in 'Viaggio' (*Altri libertini*), the protagonist's sexual identity is negotiated within the generational group and Dilo becomes not only his lover, but also a model for homosexual love. In *Gli sfiorati* and *Brucia la città*, the relationship with women is guaranteed by a homosocial bond. More specifically, in Veronesi's novel, Mète's relationship with women is always interconnected with his friendship with Damiano, since their homosocial bond is based on mutual attraction and a necessary exclusion of the love object, Mète's half-sister Belinda. Similarly, in *Brucia la città* women are important because of their role in keeping the homosocial bond safe: in both novels, it is interesting to notice that women often become the object of men's love and are denied any agency in the romantic or sexual relationship.

In *Camere separate*, the romantic relationship between Leo and Thomas is at the centre of the narrative: his homosexual love is lived, by the protagonist, through the *camere separate* strategy, which allows him to keep his independence while keeping, at the same time, his lover's affection. The homosexual love could become, for Leo, potentially destructive of his 'delaying of age' strategy, which implies him masking his homosexuality within society, and the separation that he imposes on his lover is a symptom of a more general impossibility of describing and representing a love which lacks role models and is not represented within society. A similar lack of models affects Walter in *Tutti giù per terra*: here, the young man does not conform to successful models of masculinity and his attempts to establish a relationship with young women do not follow the postmodern model of the 'confluent love' as theorised by Giddens. Finally, in *Ameni inganni*, the impossibility of the romantic relationship between Alberto and Letizia is caused by a process of debasement of the love object that affects the protagonist. The Oedipal attachment between Alberto and his mother has developed fears of commitment which forbid any 'real' involvement with women. Alberto is forced to develop his sexuality with the women from the

soft porn magazines he reads (the debased love object) and can plan a 'marriage plot' with Letizia only in the unreal world of his fantasy.

The postponement of adulthood has become a popular topic in recent times, triggering a moral panic in the media around the difficult conditions in which young Italians live and grow up. The problematic picture offered in Chapter Two highlights an economic stagnation which affects young people in various areas. As in a vicious circle, higher unemployment rates coupled with a longer education process (compared to other European countries) lie at the basis of many of the difficulties encountered in the process of coming of age for young Italians. However, without denying the seriousness of this situation, which is worth attention, my research also sheds light on an alternative mode of depicting young people's difficult coming of age. In the Introduction to this work, I wondered if, despite the lack of opportunities offered by postmodern society, it is possible for young people to decide autonomously about their future, to become active agents in a process – becoming a member of society and being recognised as such – that is deeply and negatively affected by precarious society's politics. The novels analysed, I would argue, show that the delaying of age is not always represented as a condition which is passively experienced, but as a conscious choice. My work, therefore, wants to address this contradiction between the social narrative and its fictional representation: the 'delaying of age' as a narrative strategy is one that denounces the problems affecting young people's condition, whose retreat into youth and renunciation of adult responsibilities is an active response, not a passive endurance. Whereas the work environment is plagued by precarious job offers, Walter (in *Tutti giù per terra*) prefers to live in miserable conditions on his own, instead of becoming one of the *mammoni* who, due to the impossibility of paying for accommodation, live with their parents for longer in their youth, one of Italy's national phenomenon (see Chapter Two). Similarly, the *Altri libertini* described by Tondelli in the 1980s take advantage of their marginalised position within society to establish a new form of peer-guided society in which the identification takes place no longer within adult society but within the generational group.

Of course, the 'delaying of age' process does not develop identically in all the novels selected, since they represent a various array of cultural and social situations. By using the term 'delaying of age', therefore, I do not intend to smooth away the differences between the texts, but to highlight a shared

coming of age experience – the choice of postponing one's adulthood – which is developed, through various modalities, in these texts. For Leo (*Camere separate*) the 'delaying of age' is his way of dealing with the impossibility to represent and see represented his homosexual identity within normative society; for the Veronesi generation (*Gli sfiorati*), it means not assuming any responsibilities for their actions and being totally disillusioned and detached from adult society; for Iaio and his friends (*Brucia la città*) the 'delaying of age' is a narcissistic behaviour which makes them victims of a fierce individualism; for Alberto (*Ameni inganni*), delaying the coming of age is the consequence of an Oedipal attachment to the mother and the decision to adopt an adolescent lifestyle to avoid his fear of commitment.

The traditional topos of the coming of age in contemporary Italian society is entangled in a social narrative of youth which takes into account an objective set of problems (those delineated in Chapter Two). However, it is also not able to avoid falling victim to the media anxiety and moral panic around the uncertain future of younger generations. Its representation by contemporary writers, on the one hand, denounces this situation, while, on the other hand, overturns the uncertainty around young people's future, by giving its fictional protagonists agency to freely choose their precarious identity. By bringing to the fore in this work an original way of conceiving the coming of age narrative in postmodern society, we should also reflect, in this conclusion, on the need for a new framework of analysis for literary scholars which cannot be based exclusively on the traditional *Bildungsroman* genre, but has to include new points of reference and a new paradigm that takes into account social and cultural change. The future of the coming of age narrative is one that is bound to assimilate change, yet, at the same time, to provoke change, and this study has demonstrated how the genre has been renewed in contemporary Italian literature.

However, what this study does not address is the way in which the coming of age narrative can become an agent of change, which means to investigate, first and foremost, the relationship with its readers. The reader's position and his/her response to the text is an interesting perspective from which to observe this narrative, but it requires an entirely new set of research questions which is not possible to deal with in this work. Who is the implicit reader of the coming of age novel? How does he/she negotiate the process of identity acquisition narrated in this literary genre? Is there a form of mutual

dependence and influence between readers' experiences and the 'delaying of age' trope? These are fascinating questions which I hope to be able to address in my future research and that, together with this study, call for a rethinking of Italian literary scholarship on traditional genres, such as the *Bildungsroman*, which puts it in a necessary dialogue with other disciplines and perspectives.

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